

Robert Grossbach: Driverless

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MAR/APR

**The Man Who
Put the Bomp**
Richard Chwedyk

Eleanor Arnason

Matthew Hughes

James Sallis

DISPLAY UNTIL MAY 1

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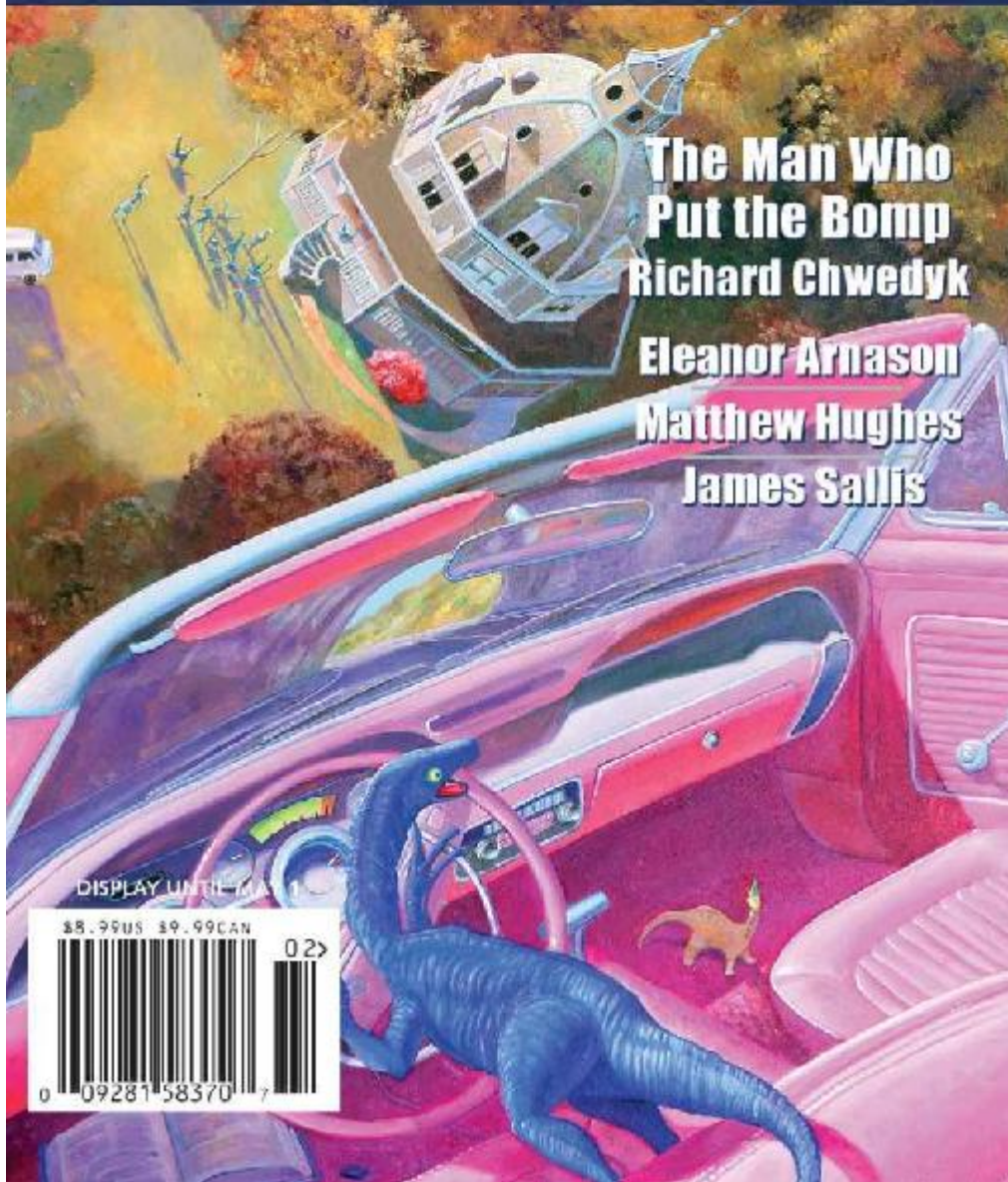
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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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The Man Who Put the Bomp

By Richard Chwedyk | 27930 words

F&SF readers first met the "saurs"—genetically engineered companions who look like tiny dinosaurs—in "The Measure of All Things," which appeared in our January 2001 issue. Like many other pets, the saurs sometimes ended up neglected or abandoned, but there was a house where rescued saurs could be safe...and get into new kinds of trouble. The saurs have appeared three more times, in "Bronte's Egg" (August 2002), "In Tibor's Cardboard Castle" (Oct/Nov 2004), and "Orfy" (Sept/Oct 2010), with "Bronte's Egg" winning the Nebula Award.

But you don't have to be familiar with any of those stories to enjoy this new novella. As you'll soon find out, the saurs are always ready to make new friends.

THERE WAS A MAN NAMED Nicholas Danner who had worked thirty-three years as a Sequencer for Toyco, and nobody knew why. Not that it was a subject of debate or speculation around the office, but every now and then some recent hire would glance over at Danner's crowded workstation and ask one of the more seasoned staffers, "Hey, what's up with the old guy?"

"Him?" The reply was always the same. "That's Danner. He's been here *forever*."

The inevitable follow-up question: "Why?"

Nobody had an answer for that one. Not even Nicholas Danner.

Not until the day he went to see the saurs.

* * *

The day Danner went to see the saurs, Axel made a discovery.

It had been two weeks since his buddy, Diogenes, was laid to rest beside the red rocket crape myrtles, just visible near the library window. Axel, the marine-blue theropod saur small enough to fit into a big shoebox if you tucked in his tail (which wouldn't be easy), stood in a central spot in the house's former dining room. He announced, in his loudest voice, to one and all:

"I'm getting *smarter* !"

For a moment, the house was never more silent.

In the next moment, a few of the little ones, the pocket-sized saurs, chuckled. Others applauded by thumping their tails against the floor. Some cheered, as if Axel had just won a round of Not So Hard.

Agnes, the gray stegosaur, took a few steps from her habitual lair under the lamp table near the window, far enough to guarantee her voice would ring out through the house.

"Prove it!"

The silence returned, the one exception being Alphonse's little radio, tuned to the ImpacNewzRadio Morning Rush Hour Wrap-Up. Ross, the corythosaur, was listening with worshipful devotion to Abby Riley, the traffic reporter, and would not surrender his attention a second time—at least not for Agnes.

Axel shouted back, "I can feel it in my head! Something's moving *around* !"

Agnes, irrefutable (and unencumbered by her mate, Sluggo, and their eggling, Leslie, who were engaged elsewhere in the house), gave Axel a careful inspection. "Your head looks the same from here!"

Axel rocked back and forth. "It feels *different* !"

"'Different' doesn't mean 'smarter.' You need to go lie down for a while."

Axel looked in every direction at once. "I don't know *how* !"

"Hah!" Agnes thumped her tail against the floor. "Figure it out, if you're so smart." She returned to her spot under the table.

"Figure it out!" Axel looked left and right, as if the answer was hidden in the roomscape.

Doc, the beige tyrannosaur with heavy-lidded eyes and a tricky left leg, had been observing all this from the plastic cube where he customarily sat, near Alphonse and Ross. He nodded serenely to Axel. "My friend, I don't know if you're smarter today than yesterday, but I trust and honor your feelings."

Alphonse looked back at Doc and whispered, "You really shouldn't encourage him."

Ross, annoyed, pointed to the radio with the parsnip he was holding in his right forepaw. "*Listenin'!*"

Doc's grin shifted slightly. "We are both investors." They were. Under assumed names at various brokerages, they had managed to assemble a considerable "nest egg," so to speak. "But I try, in my way, to support more tangible remunerations."

Alphonse came around to a full turn. "You *would* say that, considering you lost a bundle on that Toyco deal not so long ago."

Doc bowed his head in a gesture of respectful submission. "I maintain my position."

"All I can say is that the SANI Corporation must *really* want something Toyco has."

The traffic report ended.

"Bye, Abby!" Ross took a nibble of his parsnip as he headed for the living-room window to look out at whatever was there to look out at until Abby returned to the air in the afternoon. As he left the former dining room, he caught a glimpse of a saffron-colored sauropod in a little green hat approaching from the living room. Ross told Doc and Alphonse, "Tibor coming. Can hear him not making noise."

Tibor, small enough to fit in a human hand, always wore an intense scowl, like a Puritan judge or a cartoon nemesis. Along with his volcano-shaped hat, Tibor had donned a powder-blue ribbon; he was on "official" Tiborean business.

He was following Axel, who had run up to Doc, shouting, "Doc! Doc! Did I tell you about the dream I had last night?" He pulsed with energy, shifting his weight from leg to leg.

Doc smiled and shook his head. "You'll tell me now, no doubt."

"I was in a big station! Like a *train* station. It was tall, like it had no ceiling, with big steel girders, all blue, way above, and windows as big as this whole house!"

"Tibor is *here* !" Tibor announced himself, expecting universal recognition but receiving none.

"A transportation center," said Doc. "In some great city."

"Humans were everywhere, hundreds and *hundreds* of them! They were walking around because there were all sorts of places to buy stuff and food

carts everywhere! I could smell *caramel corn* ! So much *stuff* happening! I wanted to see...hear... *everything* !"

" *Here* is Tibor!" Tibor tried again, in his soft, insistent voice, but to the same lack of effect.

Doc listened patiently to Axel. "You weren't afraid? Humans are not very careful about looking at who might be underfoot."

"A human was *carrying* me. I was in his *arm* , sort of like when Tom carries me. But it wasn't Tom. In the dream I knew who he was. Now I don't. Why is that?"

"Dreams don't speak to us," said Doc. "They whisper." He hoped Axel might take the hint.

"Behold Tibor!" Tibor whispered, but no one beheld him.

"It was a *good* thing," Axel continued, his voice somewhat lowered. "I was looking at everything, but the humans didn't look at *anything* !"

Doc nodded again. "Humans have a genius for ignoring the beauty of the world, and its dangers."

"Tibor, universe-maker! Tibor the Benevolent! Field Marshal Tibor! Tiborius Doctor Honorus Tibor! Maharishi Mahesh Tibor!"

"When I woke up, I *wanted* something! I wanted it real bad! But I didn't know *what* !"

"Some common sense!" Agnes called out from under the table.

"Tibor! Tibor! Tibor! Tibor!"

"It was... *everything* ! To see for *real* ! Not just a dream!"

"Someday you shall." Doc leaned forward and patted Axel on the head. "Someday you shall."

"You're an idiot!" Agnes shouted. "You *were* out there—that's why you're *here* !"

She was far away, looking out from under the table, but she could see, if only in her mind's eye, the scar that ran all the way down Axel's back, long-healed but very deep. "When they found you, you were almost dead!"

Axel raised his head as if he was listening for something else, a tiny, insistent voice, maybe. "I'll be careful! I want to *see* it! I want to know what's *there* !"

"It is time," said Tibor.

Agnes roared, "You don't get it! *This* is your world. Look around. *This is it* ! Take it or leave it!"

Axel shook his head as if his ears had filled with bees. The move left him staring straight at Tibor. "What did you say?"

"Tibor says it is time."

"Time for what?"

Tibor, with a turret-like motion of his head, directed Axel's attention to the living room, where a small, pink vehicle stood, wooden wedges secured against each tire.

"It is time," said Tibor, "for VOOM!"

* * *

VOOM! WAS A CAR, a convertible, about a meter and a half long, seventy centimeters wide, and fifty centimeters tall. It was built for child-sized people, which is to say it was a toy, a very expensive one. It had a windshield—all the appropriate windows, in fact. It also had a steering wheel, accelerator pedal, brakes, a driver's seat, and a dashboard with control buttons. Some of them worked.

The most important button interfaced with a system that projected moving street-level images on all the windows corresponding with a real car in real motion. The images came from a long-defunct map program called, simply enough, Mappo™, taken from every road on the planet. "See the world! Mappo™'s been there!" was the long-forgotten slogan in the long-forgotten race to document every square centimeter of the known universe, so that everyone could see everything without going anywhere.

It was pink, the kind of pink that startles you when you first see it—in a good way or a bad way; often it was hard to tell which.

On each rear fender was printed, in bright, bold, lemon-yellow capital letters italicized to accentuate the sensation of speed, the word "*VOOM!*"—exclamation point included.

VOOM!

Tibor had been led to its discovery a week before by a mysterious series of notes written on slips of yellow paper left on the floor of the attic, specifically that part of the attic not reserved for the saurs' "museum."

It was upon a review of this domain that he noticed the slips of paper, each positioned in such a way that Tibor could see the next note from the

preceding one. No dim-witted slave to a belief in serendipity, Tibor understood these notes had been placed deliberately to capture *his* attention.

He looked down at the first one. In small, neat, intense block letters were the words, "FOR TIBOR."

"Quid pro quo!" said Tibor, who could not remember what the Latin phrase meant but believed it was appropriate.

He trotted over to the next slip of paper.

It read: "BECAUSE."

"Quid est disputandum!"

It wasn't the phrase Tibor wanted, but sounded something like it. He'd heard it on a video once, spoken by an austere and regal-looking figure in a judge's robe. It sounded "Tiborean."

The next slip of paper read, "TIBOR."

"Nili est nelly nell!"—or something like that.

And the next note: "IS."

Tibor had exhausted his Latin exclamations by now and fell back upon, "The game is afoot!"—even though he knew no more what this phrase meant than he did any of his mutant Latin.

The last note was firmly punctuated with an exclamation point: "STUPID!"

Tibor pondered the last note carefully. Obviously it was written in some sort of code.

He looked up and found himself within a canyon of crates, cases, and boxes. He had barely dismissed the notion that he had been drawn into an ambush when he saw it:

VOOM!

No doubt, thought Tibor, a gift from all the beings of all the Tiborean worlds, for his wise, benevolent leadership. VOOM! would be his official, royal means of conveyance.

But Tibor was too small, obviously, to control this vehicle himself. He would need a driver, a *chauffeur*.

He hurried back downstairs, in search of Axel.

* * *

Nicholas Danner heard something as he drove down the narrow two-lane road that led to the little turnoff in the woods, the one that would take him to the house where the saurs lived. Heard—maybe only in memory. Something was in the air, something the other passenger in the car could not hear. It quickened his heart, filled him with anticipation and yearning. He stepped a little harder on the accelerator.

No word for it, what he felt, other than what it was. He spoke it aloud as he turned off the Tarmac onto the gravel road.

"VOOM!"

"What's that?" Christine Haig, the young woman sitting next to him, glanced from the passenger-door window to Danner. Whatever Danner heard, it wasn't in her range. She felt only a slight apprehension and disapprobation at wasting a perfectly good morning.

"Don't remember 'VOOM!'?" Danner slowed only because the gravel road was a little rough for his experience, and for his aging, not-so-smart vehicle. He kept his eye out for the check-in box. Visitors who missed the check-in box risked having their batteries drained. "Didn't have one as a kid?"

"I didn't have many toys." Christine shifted her attention back to the passenger window. "I mean, I had *lots* of toys, but I didn't play with them. Adoptive parents always shower you with toys."

"Never told me you were adopted." Danner slowed a little more. The road looked narrower, but it was only that the trees stood closer.

"It's not important to me. You know how some kids want to know who their real parents are? I don't. It's not a big thing."

"And you didn't care for toys."

She laughed. "Or clothes. My mom took me to a fancy store and bought me a whole *wardrobe*, like I'd come from the orphanage in rags. All I wanted was a chemistry set."

"They get it for you?"

"I had to fight, but I got it. Happiest moment of my life."

Danner slowed his vehicle to a halt next to a green pole about two and a half meters tall. Attached to the pole, halfway up, was a steel-colored box no bigger than a shirt pocket. From the box came a smooth, modulated, slightly androgynous voice.

"Good morning."

"Good morning." He spoke to the box as if he were ordering at a fast-food drive-through. "Nicholas Danner and Christine Haig. This visit was authorized by Susan Leahy herself."

"Understood. If Miss Haig would speak her name aloud for voice identification, you may continue."

Danner leaned over and muttered to Christine, "Sounds like an old Reggiesystem™ one-point-four. Remember *those*?"

"From *history* class!" she whispered. Then, louder, "Christine Haig."

"Thank you. You may proceed with your visit."

"Thank you, Reggie." Danner moved his vehicle forward.

"You're welcome, Mr. Danner."

"He didn't contradict me," Danner said. "I'll bet it *is* an original Reggie."

"What *I* was told—" Christine pointed at the check-in box "—Reggie was a *singular* entity. It was outlawed, then deleted."

"And Joe Hill was killed by the firing squad. And Jesus died on the cross."

She laughed. "Only *you'd* mention Joe Hill before Jesus."

"Everyone's permitted their priorities. That you even know who Joe Hill *is* speaks to something odd about *you*."

Danner liked to hear her laugh. He rarely heard genuine laughter from a colleague. If he did, it was usually forced, like the laughter of someone who had learned how from a webinar. She was smart. And expressed feelings—real feelings. All good signs. Maybe he could help her with a thing or two. Even smart kids need help sometimes.

He would never have brought her otherwise.

Ahead, the woods cleared and the little road ran through a hectare or so of lawn. Further on, the landscaping was more elaborate, with trees and shrubbery and flower beds.

At the center of it all stood the house: a huge neo-Victorian with a big porch; a number of gabled and bayed windows; and a steeply angled, shingled roof. When Danner saw it, his heart jumped hard.

It wasn't the architecture. It wasn't the place itself. What mattered to him as he parked at the end of the gravel driveway was what—more precisely *who*—was within.

Christine exited from her side and Danner from his. She looked at the house and said, "Ugly old place."

In the big window, at the far-left end of the porch, a green corythosaur, no taller than forty centimeters, was holding a half-eaten parsnip. Next to him, about a head shorter, stood a deep-blue theropod.

Danner couldn't help but wave to them.

The corythosaur and the theropod waved back.

"You don't have to do that." Christine's first step from the vehicle was uncertain. She wore high heels like someone who had never worn them before, and certainly not on a gravel driveway. "They're just toys."

Danner walked to the porch slowly enough not to leave Christine, who was still adjusting to her heels, behind.

"You work for a toy company. You need to learn to *play*."

She pretended not to hear.

* * *

THE WEEK BEFORE, when Tibor first revealed VOOM!, Axel had stared at the car in awe. That such things could exist not only proved there was magic in the universe, but that the universe *was* magic. He lobbied for the vehicle to be brought downstairs and a place of honor found for it in the living room.

A group—a sort of ad hoc committee—went up to the attic. Agnes, of course; Sluggo and Leslie; Doc, Alphonse, and Ross; the sauropods Kara and Bronte, and Bronte's eggling, Guinevere; Preston, the green tyrannosaur who wrote novels under the name of Ellis Lawrence Cartwright; the triceratops couple, Charlie and Rosie; and about a dozen others, more curious than concerned.

Tom Groverton, the human who took care of the saurs, was also with them, but he said nothing and stayed in the background. If he was needed, he was there.

"It is pink!" Agnes said, as if "pink" were a synonym of "evil."

"It is VOOM!" Axel said, as if "VOOM!" were a synonym of "good."

"It is Tibor's!" said Tibor.

There are no synonyms for "Tibor."

There was no denying the mystery of its appearance. No one could remember when VOOM! came, or where it came from. If it had been

unloaded from a box or a crate, who unloaded it? If it had only just arrived, who brought it up to the attic, and why? If it had been up in the attic for ages, why had nobody seen it until now? A vehicle, even one built for a child, and of such a color and shape—surely such a thing could not be forgotten or ignored (much as one might try).

Objects did not just come from nowhere, and yet no one knew the origin of VOOM!

"These *abominations* were used by humans to teach their children how to run over animals and smash into them on dark roads." Agnes stared at the vehicle, tail raised, as if expecting she might have to defend herself from it. "They are weapons of aggression! They are training tools for the exercise of primal desires to enslave and dominate. Throw this thing off the roof and burn the wreckage! Then burn what's left of the burned wreckage! Get rid of it, before it destroys us all! It is a *death machine* !"

"It is *not* a death machine!" Axel waved his tiny forelimbs up and down. "It is VOOM! and it is good!"

" *Tibor's* VOOM!" said Tibor.

"It *is* big," said Kara, the rust-colored sauropod, from the other side of the vehicle. "Where would it fit?"

"How would we get it down?" Bronte, the green sauropod, stood at the back and peered around the rear bumper.

"Don't!" Agnes shook her head. "Don't even *think* about it!"

Axel ran over to Bronte. "Tom will help us! Dr. Margaret will help us!"

"What's this 'us'?" Agnes lowered her tail and curled it around laterally.

"Hubert can help! He's big! And Big Sam! And David Norman!"

"You're going to turn the big guys into beasts of burden? Treat your friends like lumbering brutes? *That's* what you want?"

Axel tried to comprehend what Agnes was saying. All he could reply was, "I want VOOM!"

"Axel—" Bronte said, striving for patience. Her eggling, Guinevere, stood close by and she wanted to be a good example.

Axel didn't let her finish. "Rotomotoman can help!"

Rotomotoman, Axel's robot, was a meter-tall cylinder with a hemispherical head. He was equipped with rod-like arms and a compartment in his torso that was an incubator for saurian eggs.

"Rotomotoman can't get up the attic stairs," Kara pointed out. "He can take the lift to the second floor, but there's no lift to the attic."

Axel froze in thought.

"Hah!" Agnes looked over in the direction of the attic stairs. "Would you risk *our* incubator just to move that—" she returned her gaze to the VOOM! "—that...PINK!"

"The question isn't *if* it can be done." Preston stared at the car's chrome-painted grillwork. "But *should* it?"

"Thank you!" Agnes inspected the tires. "With that idiot at the helm, these things can come loose!" She turned to the others and gave them her narrow-eyed stare. "Mark my words—if you humor this irresponsible lunatic again, you will regret it!"

"Perhaps it is best," Doc said, lowering his head and speaking softly into Axel's ear, "if your new chariot remains up here in the attic, where it won't disturb the sensibilities of our more apprehensive companions."

"What's a chariot?" Axel asked him.

"A horse-drawn cart."

Axel swung around to again behold the VOOM! "So we need *horses* to get it downstairs!"

Before Doc could correct Axel, Charlie, the grayish-beige triceratops, remarked to Rosie, "You know, it wouldn't hurt to find a place for this downstairs, out of the way." He stared up at the driver-side door and asked, "Does it work?"

"What?" Axel raised his forepaw to his jaw.

"Does it *work* ? Engine run? Make noise? Windows and all that Mappo™ stuff? Might be fun for the little ones. Change of pace."

"Yes!" Axel nodded emphatically. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"So," said Charlie, "it works, huh?"

Axel stopped nodding. "What?"

"Does it *work* ?"

"I..." His mouth opened wide. "I *don't know* !"

"You might want to find out." Charlie glanced in the direction of the attic stairs. "Well, going to try it or not?"

Axel hopped onto the vehicle and climbed over the driver-side door. Inside, he stared at the dashboard with its dozens of buttons and tabs. With no idea what the functions of any of the buttons were, and no idea which button to press first, and able to reach any of them only if he bounced on the VOOM!'s front seat and launched himself at the dashboard—he started at the left and systematically moved to the right. The process was neither elegant

nor effective, and by the time Axel reached the last button, the only thing he knew for sure was that it was exhausting.

Axel opened the door on the passenger side but didn't get out. He caught his breath, then hopped onto the front seat-back—high enough to see all his fellow saurs staring up at him. He looked at Tom and asked, "How does it start?"

Tom, in soft, patient voice, said, "A battery, I suppose."

Axel thought it over and said, "Yes! Yes! The *battery* !"

Tom nodded and knelt before the vehicle. He opened the hood and looked inside. All the parts, moving or stationary, were the same pink color as the vehicle's exterior. Many of the parts were neatly labeled. Many were not. He looked into the engine compartment the way you'd look at a problem growing bigger.

"Tom! Tom!"

"Yes, Axel?"

"What's wrong with the battery?"

"I don't know," Tom said. "It might need to be replaced or charged."

Axel nodded emphatically. "The charge! The *charge* !"

"This is an old, old model," said Tom. "If instructions and parts are still available, we *might* get this thing running."

Agnes walked up to Tom and raised her head as far upward as she could raise it. "If you do, human, I'll *never* talk to you again!" She stormed off, Sluggo and Leslie trailing behind.

The other saurs followed, all but Axel and Tibor. They stared at VOOM! as if it might spontaneously animate itself.

"You know," said Tom, "this isn't a bad place for it. You could come up here and ride in it. Until I can find out more about how it works, you'll have to power it with your imagination."

"*Tibor's* imagination!" said Tibor.

The way Axel stared at the pink machine, Tom could already see the wheels in motion.

That night, Axel dreamed of highways. He saw wide roads of concrete and steel and asphalt supported above the world on great columns. He sped along like a particle in some accelerator. All he saw were smears of light, as if all matter were stretched to the limits of its elasticity. Axel sped along, riding the thrill as much as the highway, shouting, " *Yes! Yes! Yes!* " in his sleep until he wasn't just shouting in his sleep. And Agnes ordered him out of

the sleep room until he calmed down, lest he wake every saur in the sleep pile.

He hurried up to the attic. Maybe if he slept in VOOM!, he reasoned, the dreams would go even faster.

When he turned left at the top of the stairs and arrived at the place he had first seen VOOM!—it was gone.

Gone.

GONE!

In a panic, he ran from room to room (with Agnes again shouting him out of the sleep room). He ran as if he had lost the vehicle through some carelessness on his part and had to get it back or lose it forever.

And then, on the first floor, in the center of the living room—there it was. VOOM!

He hopped inside and slept on the front seat.

He dreamed of highways, and robots, and space guys in the stars.

In the morning, he awoke to the sight of nearly every saur in the house (with Tom thrown in) staring at him—and VOOM!—with astonishment.

Or, in Agnes's case, with rage.

"How *dare* you move that *pink* downstairs without permission!"

Axel hadn't moved it; couldn't have.

"Human!" she shouted at Tom (she never addressed humans by their names). "Call the junk man! Move this dangerous piece of trash! Now!"

Everyone speculated on how the car could have been transported (or transported itself) downstairs in the first place, until Alfie, the tiny purple theropod who rarely moved far from the side of his bigger, violet-shaded buddy Tyrone, pointed upward and indicated the ceiling, or the second floor, or the attic, or maybe the heavens.

"Geraldine," he said.

With that, the speculation ceased.

* * *

None of the events described here—the major ones—would have occurred were it not for the sauropod no more than eighteen centimeters in

length. She was a shade of light umber that looked darker at certain times of day, like dusk or midnight.

In her tiny black eyes was a gleam of diabolical serenity.

Her name was Geraldine.

Her one purpose in life, as some saw it, was to unsettle.

Unsettle what? As an old actor from the previous century once replied to a similar question: "Whaddaya got?"

She spent long hours in the shoebox atop the desk against the wall in the workroom—the shoebox everyone referred to as her "lab," and from which everyone kept a safe distance. The little ones spoke of the strange lights and unearthly noises that emanated from the lab. The bigger saurs chose not to speak of them at all. Only Bronte's eggling, Guinevere, looked up at the lab with no apparent fear—maybe even with a bit of longing and anticipation. Nothing worried Bronte more than seeing her little one with her forelegs up on a tiny plastic cube to get a better glimpse of the lab's cutout doorway, the sauropod skull and crossed femurs printed above it, and the block-letter inscription below: "DANGER!"

None of the events described here would have occurred were it not for Geraldine. And that includes the little packages Geraldine prepared and left for Tom just outside the lab about the same time Diogenes died.

Packages addressed to Nicholas Danner c/o Toyco.

Why they weren't sent to his home, Danner couldn't say. He didn't even know where they came from. No notes included. No return address.

The contents of these tiny parcels were oddly shaped bits of plastic and metal, like pieces left over from an assemble-it-yourself kit, or the sweepings of a junk shop.

It could have been a joke, or the activity of a schizophrenic, he thought, until the third package arrived with a note.

On a wrinkled scrap of paper, in big block letters, were three words: "ARE YOU STUPID?"

Danner read the words: clear as a signature, clear as a fingerprint, if the sender had fingers, which she didn't.

He slipped the contents out of sight, as he had done with the previous two, into the bottom drawer of his desk.

At home, out of the monitoring range of his employers, he made a call to the Atherton Foundation.

"This is Nicholas Danner. I need to schedule an appointment to visit the house."

He specified the old neo-Victorian just outside the great megalopolis where Danner lived.

"And the reason for this appointment, Mr. Danner?" asked the young assistant to the associate director.

"Geraldine."

Without another word, Danner's call was redirected to the head of the Foundation. If the color of the phone had been red—bright, *urgent* red—it still would not have looked urgent enough.

* * *

CHRISTINE HAIG was smart, like many young women. Smart enough to think herself ready for power with all its emblems and proofs, as much power as she could get. She had a sense of humor, too, which, for the working set, was a luxury few could afford. She also had cunning. Few ever succeeded without that.

Where she surpassed the lot was in the possession of wit. For good reason, those in power keep a careful eye on the possessor of wit.

And so Christine felt it was a deliberate assault on her self-esteem—one devised as a challenge, perhaps—when her manager, Zoey Guinness, placed her in the workstation directly across from Nicholas Danner, the "old guy" who'd been there forever. Yes, she was hired as a Sequencer, like Danner. Even so, she felt she'd been relegated to the dustiest corner of the shop. Zoey explained it was a temporary "space allocation" problem. Christine only trusted Zoey to a point; she could tell Ms. Guinness was equally ambitious. But that might also make her a good mentor. Zoey wore high heels, even under casual slacks.

In suit, Christine, with her first pay, bought a pair of high heels, though she had yet to learn how to walk in them.

That her situation, sitting across from Danner, might be more fortuitous to her didn't occur until the afternoon she noticed Mr. Austin, the SANI Corp. executive who was sizing up Toyco for the imminent merger, staring from

across the room at Danner with a "something" gaze: part awe, part respect, part envy; and—strangest of all—part fear.

She looked at Austin, then at Danner, then back at Austin. It didn't make sense. Neither one spoke a word. And yet it appeared that Danner—the old "lifer" at the dead end of a dead-end career—had achieved a status Austin and his high-powered cohorts could never attain.

Not that Christine wanted to be anything like Danner, but whatever it was Danner had, she wanted it. Like the high-heeled shoes. Like the exclusive device Austin carried about with him: a notebook made of small slips of paper bound together by a spiral of wire. Private, unhackable. Why hadn't anyone thought of such a thing before?

Emblems and proofs of power. Oh, she *really* wanted them.

Even if it meant becoming Danner's friend to earn them.

* * *

It was like this: Tom, fortunately, had no difficulty acquiring a new battery. Parts were tricky to locate, even on the world market; batteries were not. It was much harder to find an outlet converter. VOOM! came from a time when the country used a different standard from the rest of the world. Once located, battery and convertor arrived within the week.

Not only was VOOM! now fully powered and capable of presenting the illusion of motion through Mappo™'s "street-level" projections on the windows, but the "real" electrical engine drove the "real" wheels of the vehicle to a maximum of five kilometers per hour, a fact that infuriated Agnes.

"There's a *reason* things get put into attics!" Agnes had faced down the VOOM! and its metallic-painted grill. "A crazed *idiot* , who for the moment will remain *nameless* , might get behind the wheel and start *rolling* this monstrosity around the floor without regard for the little ones standing by!"

If given the chance, Tom might have explained to her that Axel still had no way to control the vehicle. He was not equipped in size or shape to operate the car in the manner intended by its manufacturers. He had to stand on the front seat and lean *very* far forward, almost as if he were in a full run,

just to get his forepaws on the steering wheel. This posture afforded him little in the way of maneuverability for turning.

The accelerator and brake were, from this vantage point, unattainable.

Not to mention that he couldn't see over the dashboard.

Axel was undeterred. He searched for sticks and levers and pulleys. Unfortunately, the sticks were too short or too long, or they slipped from their makeshift moorings; the levers had no way of being secured.

That might have been the end of it, until the day before Danner's visit, when Axel noticed Ross heading up to the attic and followed him.

Ross was never one to deviate from his activities: attending to the traffic reports; staring out the window; listening to the "music" played by the Five Wise Buddhasaurs; a rare game of Not So Hard with Alphonse. But he rarely went up past the second floor.

Ross scoured the museum, then the attic space where VOOM! had been discovered. He scrounged around through cartons of what looked like random stuff: things put away in haste to be sorted out later, but never were.

"Hey, Ross!" Axel could not restrain his curiosity. "Whatcha lookin' for?"

"Click Thing." He spoke without stopping his search.

"Click Thing?"

"Click Thing. Goes 'click.'" He moved on to another carton.

"That's neat," said Axel.

"Not neat. *Click!*" Ross opened a carton that was filled with coffee mugs and quickly closed it back up.

"What you need it for?"

"Not for me. For *you* !" He looked into a shoebox that contained, alas, nothing but shoes, and closed it up again.

"Me?"

"Click Thing. You click 'go,' it go. You click 'stop,' it stop. You click 'on,' it on."

" *What's* on?"

" *VOOM!* on!"

"VOOM!?"

"VOOM! Click 'off,' it off."

"So if we find the Click Thing, I can make VOOM! go?"

"What I said."

"Can I help?"

"Why not?"

Axel did more than open the next carton; he leapt into it. If the Click Thing could make VOOM! go, it had to be found.

He found a waffle maker and a toaster. But no Click Thing. From another carton, Axel pulled out an ear syringe and showed it to Ross.

"Too big." He batted it from Axel's grip. "Not like that!"

"What's it look like?"

"Click Thing small. Square. Like wrecked angle. Little guy. Fit in your paw."

Axel dug into another carton. And another. And one more. From each, he pulled a dozen things and presented them to Ross.

Ross shook his head each time. "Not Click Thing."

They continued to search. Axel delved into yet another carton. In the bottom was a wooden box originally made for something once (maybe still) called cigars. This cigar box contained sets of cards that used to be bound together by rubber bands now gone flaccid and brittle. One deck featured humans in sports uniforms. Another bundle of cards depicted starships and "space guys" in red uniforms. One pack was devoted to wizards and dragons. At the bottom of the box was a thick stack featuring pictures of dinosaurs. Ross cast the cards aside.

"Wait!" Axel retrieved one of the scattered cards. "This guy looks like Baraboo Bob!"

Ross refused the distraction. "You want Click Thing or no?"

Axel, with a stifled moan, let the card drop. "Yes! Click Thing! Yes yes yes!"

"Here!" Ross pointed to an enameled tile about the size and shape of a domino. It looked very much like a domino, with its eight dots on one side, grouped four and four. The dots, unlike those on dominoes, were not concave, but convex. When you pressed any of them, they made a distinctive "click" sound.

One more thing distinguished it: it was pink.

Ross handed it to Axel. "See?" With a digit of his left forepaw, he pointed to each tiny button. "On. Off. Stop. Go. Back. Left. Right." He gestured energetically to the buttons. "These make VOOM! move."

"What's that one?" Axel pointed to last concave spot on the face of the Click Thing, at the bottom right.

"That," said Ross, "is NO!"

"No?"

"NO! Don't press! Don't *ever* press!"

Axel stared at it, absorbed in its mystery. "Oh, I'll *never* use the last button! I promise! Never never *never* !"

"Unless," Ross pointed upward with one digit, "emergency!"

Axel nodded vigorously. "Emergency! Then NO! is YES!"

Ross nodded. "When Tom charge Click Thing, you *own* da *road* !"

"What?"

Almost from nowhere (for it had to come from somewhere) Ross took out a parsnip and with its narrow end he tapped Axel. " *You* own da *road* !" He tapped him again. " *You*. "

"I don't know how to thank you."

"No *thank* ! *Own* da *road* !" He put the tip of the parsnip in his mouth.

"How did you know about the Click Thing?"

Ross nibbled on his parsnip before answering. "Been around."

"Around what?"

"All around." He spoke as he chewed. "Gow-boys. Gobos. Ganadians."

"Why'd you find it for me?"

"You OH-kay. Make Agnes mad. You OH-kay."

"Okay?"

"Oh-KAY!" Still nibbling his parsnip, Ross started back down the stairs.

"Okay!" Axel, with the Click Thing, followed after.

He still needed one more element: height. Even with the Click Thing charged and operative, he still couldn't see over the dashboard. It would be no fun to roam the world if all you could see were a plastic panel, buttons, dials, and a steering wheel.

Fortunately, Hubert contributed a book from the library. It was a volume of more than two thousand pages, very old, from a period some scholars refer to as "Paste Modern." The book was titled *Zembli* . No one remembered the name of the author, but the body of the text appeared to be a random dusting of words taken from other novels, cut to shreds, and randomly re-pasted. The best purpose for which such a book could be employed was to provide Axel with sufficient elevation to see past the dashboard. It took some effort for Hubert to carry it over, but he was glad to see it finally put to use.

Axel was almost ready.

Agnes, however, would not relent.

"No good ever came from anything *pink* !"

"You may not have noticed," said Charlie, looking across the room to Bronte's eggling, "but little Guinevere is pink, too."

Agnes, undeterred, was about to speak again when Elliot, the red stegosaur, timidly concurred. "He's right."

"Yeah," Baraboo Bob, the styracosaurus, added his vote. "Guinevere is pink."

Several other saurs muttered in agreement.

A small, curious crowd gathered around Agnes, who was standing in front of VOOM! with Sluggo and Leslie. Also in the crowd was Lana, a sauropod of unquestionably pink color. She didn't look angry, only interested in seeing a plated quadruped backpedal.

Kara regarded Agnes the same way.

As did Bronte.

And, of course, Guinevere.

Agnes stared at them as if she were surrounded by assassins.

"Are you all idiots? It's *not* the same thing! Guinevere is *not pink* ! She is *salmon* !"

A number of saurs laughed. More of them *wanted* to laugh, but were afraid to.

A little one whispered to another saur standing nearby, "Agnes said Guinevere is a fish."

" *That's not what I said at all!* "

"Salmon is a fish," said another little one.

"Salmon is a *color* , too!" Agnes shot back.

"Color of a fish," said Tex, a blue-gray hadrosaur.

"Guinevere is *not a fish* !"

"You said she was a salmon," Tex insisted.

"Salmon- *colored* — *not a salmon* ! Are you listening?"

"I don't know about you," said Charlie, "but salmon sure looks pink to me!" He smiled at Guinevere, who smiled back.

Some little ones repeated, "Fish!" Others chanted, "Salmon!"

"You've all gone *crazy* !" Agnes shouted at them. "Or stupid! Can't you see it doesn't matter what color Guinevere is?"

And another chant started—an easy one for saurian voices; they had no trouble with the dominant vowel, and the consonants were simple to articulate:

"VOOM! VOOM! VOOM!"

Agnes's sides drew in and out. The plates along her back rippled like waves in a troubled stream.

"Fools! Idiots! Cretins!"

She would have kept haranguing everyone had she not noticed, standing next to Sluggo, her eggling—her Leslie. He looked up at her, wide-eyed (or as wide-eyed as an eggling can manage) and trembled.

Agnes, more often than not, had an impenetrable surface when it came to what she knew and what she believed to be right. She never doubted: the world was wrong, plain and simple, and it was her duty to make that point clear to everyone until such time as the world became right—until the world *shaped up* .

But then there was Leslie. The way he looked at her.

Her anger didn't lessen, but it eased with her breathing. She swung her tail around and, with its momentum, turned away from VOOM! From everyone.

"Sluggo! Leslie! Come along!"

Sluggo and Leslie came along, the little one looking first to Sluggo for assurance.

The advantage to having a physique that places your head near the floor is that parent and offspring can see eye-to-eye from an earlier age.

Later, when she had calmed down, Agnes climbed the plastic stairs up to the table near the window in the former dining room and walked directly up to the ReggieSystem™ computer portal.

"Hey, Reggie! I'm sending a message!" She spoke to the Reggie icon in the center of the portal display screen.

"To whom do you wish to send the message?" The icon, who previously wore a serene expression, appeared more guarded now.

"To the idiot President."

" *Another* message?"

"There a problem?"

A pause before the reply. "Audio or voice-to-text?"

"I don't care, as long as she gets it. Make sure you copy it to all other humans."

" *All* humans?" Reggie accented each syllable tersely.

"Scratch that. Let *her* worry about it."

Another pause. "You may begin dictating."

"Good." She began without hesitation. "Dear President Idiot: It has recently come to my attention that *dangerous killing machines* have been left *available* and *unguarded* in places where possibly unstable—delete that 'possibly'—where *unstable* lunatics can acquire these *weapons* and *use* them against *innocent* and *unsuspecting* members of the saurian constituency! How can you possibly *live* with yourself in good conscience—"

* * *

"You know," said Dr. Margaret Pagliotti, the woman who kept track of the saurs' health, "Agnes has a point."

Dr. Margaret rarely qualified her statements. No "maybe." Never "perhaps."

"I know," said Tom.

They were in Tom's office the day before Danner's visit, drinking coffee. "Dr. Margaret," as most of the saurs called her, had already completed her rounds and was surprised at how contagious Axel's enthusiasm for the VOOM! had become. "You said yourself you don't know where this car came from. No record of its delivery. It's not inventoried with the rest of the things in the attic."

"I found an empty crate up there," said Tom. "It's the right size. It could be no one ever looked in it before."

Dr. Margaret frowned. "Maybe, for safety's sake, you *should* intervene this time."

They were sitting together on a little green couch next to Tom's desk. Each had an arm around the other. At her words, Tom withdrew and sat forward to the edge of his seat.

"My job isn't to do what *I* think is right. It's to trust *them* to do the right thing—to figure it out. Make sense?"

"Yes. I don't like it, but it makes sense."

"You're a doctor, always making decisions for others."

"That's not true!" She shoved him with the palm of her hand. "Not...not *always*. Besides, we treat people like toys sometimes, don't we?" She stood up and poured herself another cup of coffee from the carafe at the edge of Tom's desk.

"We used to make toys for people. Maybe now it's the other way round." Tom held out his empty mug.

"I don't even know what a toy *is* anymore." She poured him some more coffee and returned to the seat next to him.

"I'm glad I don't have to know." Tom took Dr. Margaret's hand—the one not holding her coffee—and squeezed it gently. "All I have to do is live with them."

You live with them too much, Dr. Margaret thought, making decisions again.

* * *

"Who cares about a bunch of rejects?" Christine Haig had asked when Nicholas Danner, rather spur-of-the-moment, offered her the chance to visit the saurs with him.

"*You* should care," said Danner, staring at his screen.

"Why?"

"You're in the toy business now. It's what you do."

She replied offhandedly, "Bioengineered toys that triggered one of the worst marketing disasters in retail history."

"It was a disaster *we* created. Right here."

"So?"

"You can learn a lot from a disaster." He spoke as he worked.

"Like what?"

"Like, the simplest thing about a disaster is creating one."

Christine nodded. "Right. The hardest part is the cleanup. Oil spills. Cadmium in foodstuffs. Meltdowns. Pesticides. Collapsed infrastructure. All that fun stuff."

"That's not the hardest part."

"What is, then? Since you're so smart."

"Preventing it."

Christine cleared her throat. "Easy to say."

"I know. That's why I said it. Still true."

The thing about all Danner's "stuff"—the pictures pushpinned to the walls, the books (all the novels of Ellis Lawrence Cartwright), the models,

the old tools from bygone days—was not how they distracted Danner but how they distracted others.

In contrast, Christine's space was devoid of the slightest ornament. Were it not for her name plaque pinned to the cubicle partition, it would have been anonymous. She caught herself staring at Danner's photograph of a railroad engine that had crashed through the outer wall of the grand old Montparnasse train terminal in 1895. The engine, having been on a track a level above the street, now hung at a precarious angle and was surrounded by debris. When she realized she was staring at the picture, she turned back to her screen.

"You're crazy," she said. "You sound like my dad."

She lied. He sounded nothing like her dad. And she didn't really believe he was crazy. He was fun to work with, but *something* must have been wrong with him. A smart guy in such a low-grade job—why waste time with *him* ?

"Want to see something?" He was still staring at his screen.

"What?"

"Something."

" *What* ?"

"Take a look."

It wasn't a busy day. Already she was filling up her time archiving. She came around to his cubicle and stood behind him, peering at his screen from over his shoulder.

He played her part of a Canadian documentary about a small, green corythosaur with a canvas tote bag slung across his back, bandolier-style. He collected coins he found in the plaza just outside the television studios, took them to a convenience store a block or two away, and *bought* food.

"I've seen this," said Christine. "He buys carrots, right?"

"Parsnips."

"But so what? An abandoned bio-toy adapts. He can count, knows what money is, and buys food. So what?"

"Keep watching."

The documentary went on to show that the corythosaur carried back to the plaza bags of popcorn and sunflower seeds for the sparrows and squirrels that also foraged in the area.

"A 'bio-toy,' as you call him, who learns to buy food and to feed himself is one thing. For that 'toy' to return to feed his fellow creatures...can you still call him a 'toy'?"

"From a performance perspective—"

" *Fuck* performance!" His voice echoed through the entire Sequencing Department. "You ask someone to play 'Pop Goes the Weasel' and you get a Chopin sonata instead and you fail him on a 'performance perspective'! It's 'Not to plan.' Are you *nuts* ?"

"But that's what it—"

"Forget that. Look at this."

He cued another video, a hearing in a Senate chamber crowded with suited legislators and their aides, and media people of the type who used to be called "journalists."

At screen center, a beige tyrannosaur sat behind one of the big tables reserved for witnesses, their counsel, and guests.

These were the famous "Koine-Belter Hearings" on whether or not to grant special status to certain bioengineered life-forms—namely, the saurs.

The beige tyrannosaur was small enough that he could have stood on the table and seen things from a human eye level, but instead he sat on a raised chair. Perhaps it felt undignified to stand on the table. His deep baritone cut through the riot of voices that burst from the committee when Senator Conman protested the Atherton Foundation's request that one of the saurs be allowed to testify. Conman insisted it "insulted the dignity" of the committee to allow a "genetically manipulated beast" a voice in the chamber, like "allowing a dog to bark for its freedom." The senator went on to say the "dinosaur" was "obviously manipulated and cannot possibly think for itself."

The tyrannosaur replied: "I well understand the senator's concern to establish my authentic autonomy. Let me assure you, I am not a ventriloquist's dummy. Nor am I a piece of technology, nor the medium for anyone's speech but my own. But—"

Senator Belter tried to cut in, but the saur raised his voice.

"— *may I remind the committee* , with *all due respect* , as difficult as it is for them to establish *my* autonomy, so I find it difficult to confirm *yours* . Are you not all ventriloquists' dummies for other vested interests?"

The committee room went wild with shouting, gavel-pounding, and cameras rolling.

"Someday," Danner halted the video, "you should hear the complete testimony."

"I have."

"And you call that the 'worst marketing disaster in the history of retail'?" Danner scratched his head.

"I don't care." Christine was back at her desk. "That's in the past. No one will ever duplicate it. Get over it. Move on."

Danner sighed, exited the videos, and returned to his work.

A few moments later, Christine's phone beeped. She spoke softly, briefly, then walked over to Zoey's office, as if she had been summoned.

The door closed behind her.

Danner didn't like closed doors. After thirty-three years with a troubled company, the click of a shutting door sounded remarkably like a hammer being drawn back on a revolver.

And the revolver was always aimed at your head.

The door stayed closed for an hour before Christine returned to her desk.

For another hour she said nothing. Then: "Maybe I *will* go with you to the house."

Something is up, Danner thought. Christine was a smart kid. He wanted her to see what she was potentially dealing with—that they weren't making bio-widgets rolling off an assembly line. She wouldn't be working in Sequencing for long; she'd jump up to more important posts, and quickly. She didn't need to engage in subterfuge. Maybe she didn't know that. Just out of college. Maybe he could still save her soul if he approached it the right way.

He knew that last part—about saving her soul—was a joke. How dare he think he could help anyone? And yet he did.

Or he had to try.

"Sure," he said. "I'll pick you up. Mind taking my car?"

* * *

THE DAY DANNER went to see the saurs was the same day Tibor was ready for VOOM!

The Click Thing and the battery had been charged the night before.

Once Tibor reminded him, Axel, of course, was supercharged. He sprinted over to the vehicle, hopped up (it took a hop for him to reach up to the door with his forelimbs), and climbed in. Tibor followed a few paces behind, maintaining a regal distance.

Axel had placed the Click Thing on the front seat the night before. If he had left it anywhere else he would have forgotten where he put it.

He'd also arranged for the voice of Reggie to be audible through the car "stereo" speaker, so that Reggie could function as a sort of navigator.

Tibor planned to sit on top of the front seat-back. It afforded him the best view as well as the best place from which to be viewed. He knew he would be greeted by adoring throngs as he entered the city. Thousands would line the street; some might be holding signs or banners. "Welcome Tibor!" "We love Tibor!" Were they not able to see Tibor—their brave leader—they would surely be disappointed. It was a hardship to summon two theropods, Slim and Slam, to bring the plastic stairs for him to climb atop the front seat, but Tibor was willing to forgo his natural modesty, for Tibor loved his people.

Tibor assured Slim and Slam that when he addressed the Great Tiborean Council (not to be confused with the *Grand* Tiborean Council, which was purely ceremonial) in the megalopolitan Temple of Tibor, he would mention them both by name in humble gratitude.

Slim and Slam secured the plastic stairs and beat it.

The top of the front seat was narrow, but Tibor was small, and he had no worry of lurching from his perch when the vehicle accelerated or came to an abrupt halt.

As a further concession to Agnes's protests, Charlie had suggested that the wooden wedges be placed under each of the tires. Unless the engine was given a real jolt, pedal to the floor, the wedges would prevent the car from any forward or reverse movement.

This didn't completely mitigate Agnes's concerns, but it was better than Axel's suggestion to station Rotomotoman in front of the car with raised hand and the word "HALT!" flashing boldly on his torso display screen.

Axel asked Tibor, "So, where you wanna go?"

"Tiboria!"

"Where's that?"

"The great city to the north."

Reggie, through the car speaker, informed the two: "Mappo™ does not indicate any destination by that name."

"It is a *secret* name," said Tibor, "known only to a select few."

"It appears," said Reggie, "that Mappo™ is not a member of the select few."

"Is it anywhere near a train station?" Axel stared at the speaker. "I dreamed about a train station last night."

"The Grand Tiborean Terminus," Tibor said, not missing a beat. "It is well known and much admired throughout the galaxy."

"Let's go there!" Axel hopped onto the copy of *Zemblia* on the front seat.

Tibor gave the destination a moment of thought. "It is exactly where Tibor intends to go."

"Mappo™ does not indicate any destination by that name," Reggie replied.

"The big one!" Axel insisted

Reggie paused to search. "A visual scan indicates you have identified the Oscar Gordon Memorial Mass Transit Center, often referred to as 'the O. G.'"

"Oh! Gee!" Axel raised his forelimbs as far as he could raise them. "Let's go!"

He reached for the Click Thing and...

...It wasn't there!

"The click thing is gone! The click thing is *gone* !"

He stared at the spot where he had left it the night before, as if it might materialize in response to his need. It didn't. He searched the front seat, the back seat (as much of a back seat as there was), the floor, the trunk, the engine—all around (and underneath) the car. He followed an often practiced though consistently ineffectual rule: if shouting for something brings no results, shout louder: " *The click thing is gone! The click thing is gone!* "

The degree of alarm, panic, injury, and even despair in his voice attracted a number of saurs, including Bronte and Kara, who raced from the library where they had been reading to Hetman, the blind and broken tyrannosaur relegated to a wheeled, child-sized hospital bed.

"Did you forget it somewhere?" Kara asked.

"No!" Axel returned to the spot on the front seat where he had left the Click Thing the night before.

"Did it fall on the floor?" asked Bronte.

"No!"

"It must be someplace." Kara looked around the living room. "No one would be so cruel as to steal, especially something that means so much to you."

" I know who steal!" said Ross, standing on the couch and looking down at the gathered saurs. "Someone not like Click Thing! Someone not like VOOM! Someone not like PINK!"

They all stared in the direction of Agnes's lair.

" *Of course* I didn't *steal* it!" Agnes told them. "All I did was confiscate a piece of dangerous equipment."

"You take Click Thing I give Axel!" Ross pointed his parsnip at her. "You *steal* !"

Agnes reared back. " *You* are an *accessory* to *lunacy* !"

"You shouldn't have done that," Bronte said to Agnes.

In a louder voice, Kara added, "You have no authority!"

"I have all the authority I need!" Agnes twisted her tail around until her spikes faced downward. "Am I the only one present who cares about the safety and well-being of everyone here, especially the little ones?"

"No!" said Kara. "You're not! Even if you were, you don't just take things by cover of night! It's devious!"

"I don't care!" Agnes said.

"You act like *human* !" said Ross.

"Take that back!" Agnes raised her tail.

"Not take back!" Ross folded his forelimbs stubbornly.

"It's cruel," said Bronte. "Cruel to Axel."

"Are you blind?" Agnes stomped the floor with a foreleg. "This isn't just Axel—it's that dimwit Tibor, too! And wherever Tibor sticks his goofy green hat, you know that Geraldine can't be far behind."

It was a sensitive note to strike with Bronte, given her concern for Guinevere's ongoing fascination with the strange saur's "lab." With less certainty, Bronte replied, "We don't know if Geraldine has anything to do with this."

Agnes snorted.

"Agnes—" Axel looked at the stegosaur with the expression of someone who has missed his train...forever.

"No!"

" *Please!* Give it back! I promise—"

"I don't have to give *back* anything!" Agnes looked him straight in the eye. "It isn't mine, but it isn't *yours* , either!"

Doc arrived, as quickly as his tricky left leg allowed. He swayed a little as he found his balance and caught his breath.

"My dear Agnes—"

"Oh, shut up!" Agnes shook her head. "Don't even start!"

"Is anyone else here protesting?" He looked around the room. "Who here wishes to see this VOOM! returned to the attic?"

No shouts of "Aye!" No raised forelimbs.

Agnes dismissed them all. "What do *you* know? You're all *brainwashed*!"

"Agnes, please!" Axel wailed. "Please please please please *please*!"

Tom came in from the kitchen, where he had been clearing up from breakfast. He sat down on the floor among them so the saurs wouldn't have to look up so far to see his face.

"Is there any way you can come to a compromise?" He spoke to everyone but looked straight at Agnes.

"I thought you'd ask that. I'm not going to hand over that damn Clicker, or whatever you call it." She stared defiantly at Axel, then at Ross, and finally at Tom. "I've hidden it. If you can find it, you can have it, but I won't simply give it back."

"Where is it?" Kara asked.

"That's for you to find out!"

"Agnes—" Kara's tone grew sharper.

"That's my compromise, take it or leave it!" She slapped her tail against the floor like a judge pounding a gavel, turned away, and headed for her lair.

Sluggo, who had been standing next to Agnes all this time and whom no one noticed until now, said to the others, "I think she's wrong." And to Axel: "I'm sorry. If I knew where it was, I would tell you."

"When is Tibor's estimated time of arrival in Tiboria?" asked Tibor, who somehow managed to miss...everything.

From Agnes's lair: "Hah!"

"Axel not worry." Ross patted Axel on the back. "We find Click Thing."

"Where?" Axel's voice sounded weaker than anyone had heard it in a long time.

"Where Agnes hide. Where else?" He pointed to the window of the former dining room. "Let's ride!"

"Ride?"

"What Gow-boys say."

"Up there?"

From somewhere (again), Ross found a parsnip, held it by the thick end, and pointed the other end toward his head. "We think like Agnes." He then pointed to Agnes's lair. "Then we know where Click Thing is."

Axel looked frightened by the prospect. "She's too smart."

Ross poked him with the parsnip. "You say you smarter now, right?"

"I *did* !" Axel raised his forepaw to his jaw, as if remembering a forgotten promise. "I *did* say I was smarter!"

"Smart enough to think like Agnes," said Ross, in softer voice, as if Agnes might overhear them.

"Oh, I'll never be *that* smart!"

"You lucky!" He pointed to the window. " *Let's think!* "

If Agnes heard, she gave no sign to them. One never knew. Agnes was a lurker.

Ross dragged over a set of plastic stairs, which they used to ascend to the seat of the couch. From there they climbed on the armrest, and from there to the top of the seat-back, which was a step or two from the window ledge. They placed their hind legs on the ledge while their tails rested against the seat-backs.

Ross nibbled his parsnip and stared out at the trees surrounding the grounds. Axel, following his lead, also stared out at them.

"Ross?"

Ross nibbled his parsnip and said nothing.

"What are we looking at?"

"Not looking! *Thinking!* "

"About what?"

"Agnes!"

"Ohhhh! Right."

"Where Agnes hide Click Thing."

"Right."

"Not *right* ! *Where!* "

"I don't know."

"That's why you *think* !"

"Oh!"

He tried to think about Agnes, but all he could think about were the trees.

Ross must have been thinking about trees, too, in spite of what he said about Agnes and the Click Thing. He stared into the distance and said, "*Them* still out there."

Axel didn't have to ask who "them" referred to. They were the "guys from Toyco." They listened, with high-tech, high-power equipment. They waited for a chance—slim, but still a chance—that through some oversight on the part of Tom or Dr. Margaret, they might acquire a few DNA samples good enough to allow them to...to what? They didn't quite know. They knew that

the saurs—the ones who dwelled here, and in other similar homes—did not live up to the specifications Toyco thought they had hard-coded into them: limited intelligence; a three-year life-span; sterility. Toyco had surrendered their ownership of the genomes in exchange for release from a tsunami of liability cases.

It didn't take long for Toyco to regret the decision. It was as if they had given away penicillin, thinking it nothing more than moldy bread. If a saur lived ten times past her life-span, "bad" toys *could* be good medicine.

Or something. No one knew. It was important enough to attract the attention of the multinational SANI Corporation, a major defense contractor. They were determined to get Toyco: all that it owned and all it ever *had* owned.

Including the unmarked van parked in the woods outside the house, with humans inside staring out at Axel and Ross...who were staring back at *them* .

"Still out there." Ross nibbled his parsnip.

"Bad guys," Axel said—not like he was afraid of them; he just didn't know what else to call them.

"Geraldine get 'em once." Ross bit down on the tip of his parsnip and made a loud snap. "Get 'em *good* !"

Ross hadn't seen it, but had been told many times about the flash that came from Geraldine's "lab," and the sizzling noise followed by the van (the "old" van, the one that had the bogus "Forestry Service" logo) tearing out of its spot in the woods, blue smoke trailing from the back and the smell of burning plastic in the air. It was why Tom now kept the fire extinguishers up in the workroom.

Axel had to ask, "Are we still thinking about Agnes?"

"Sure."

"Why are we looking at the trees?"

"Looking at *forest* !"

"Oh!" Axel stared more carefully. "That's out there, too?"

Ross cocked his head and stared at the driveway. "Listen!"

"To what?" Axel heard plenty of sounds *in* side—voices; checkers sliding across the floor; music from the video playing in the living room; the "music" of the Five Wise Buddhasaurs, tweedling, honking, bellowing—but nothing from *out* side.

"Car coming!" Ross raised one digit of his forepaw as if he could balance the sound on the end of it.

"A car? Like, a VOOM! maybe?"

"Big car. *Human* car!"

"Humans are coming?"

"Who *else* comes in human car?"

"Dr. Margaret?"

Ross shook his head. "Dr. Margaret drive big thing, like truck. This littler. Little human car. Yellow car."

Sure enough, from around the corner came a compact vehicle. It was one of those cars, from the old days, that ran on interchangeable power supplies. No autodrive, or one of a very basic sort.

Two people were inside.

And the car was yellow.

"How did you know?" Axel had to ask.

"Been around."

The car continued a little further and stopped. The two humans exited. One was young and female, in jeans, a light blouse, and jacket. She had a bag with a strap over her shoulder. Even in her shades, Ross could tell she was deliberately not looking at him, the way pedestrians won't look at panhandlers.

And her shoes had high heels—high and narrow.

The other human was...old. How old, Ross and Axel couldn't say. There was a line humans crossed, and when they did they were simply "old."

For the record, he was also on the tall side. His beard was white. What was left of his hair was gray. He wore old denims and a corduroy jacket. He looked relaxed in a way the female human didn't. He wore glasses, too, something you didn't see much anymore. People wore glasses more as adornments, like bracelets or earrings. The old human looked like he really needed them.

Ross pressed one forepaw to the window, staring closely at the two. The old human smiled. The young female's lips moved as she cursed, struggling to keep her balance, her heels sinking into the gravel.

Axel turned around and shouted to the rest of the household: "H-u-u-u-u-mans! Humans are coming!"

It was standard practice to announce the arrival of any visiting humans. There were saurs who, for very good reason, desired to keep their distance, strangers or otherwise.

Outside, the old human waved at Ross.

Ross waved back.

"That guy," said Ross, "he OH-kay."

Axel waved to the old human. "Who is he?"

"He put Bomp."

The old human waved back to Axel.

"You know him?"

Ross shook his head.

"Then how do you know?"

Ross smiled. "In bones. You *know* ! I *know* !" He pointed to the old human again. "He put *Bomp* !"

"Bomb?" Agnes rushed from her lair. "Who's got a bomb?"

"Not *bomb* . Bomp!"

Agnes ran up the plastic stairs. In an instant, she was at the window, forelegs on the ledge, hind legs on the seat-back.

"Now, who's got the bomb?" She scrutinized the humans.

"Not *bomb* . Bomp! Bee-oh-em-pee!" With each syllable, Ross tapped the window glass with his parsnip.

"What're you spelling for?" Agnes cocked her head to the humans outside. " *They* can't hear us."

"PEE, as in *parsnip* !"

"Pee? You should have taken care of that—"

" *Not* Beee! *Not* bomb! *PEE*! "

Agnes twisted around and shouted, "Attention! Attention all saurs! *Dangerous* humans are now approaching the house! I repeat: *dangerous* humans are now approaching! Take cover! They are armed with a bomb!"

"Bomb! No bomb! *Nobody* got bomb!"

"Then what were you yelling for?"

"Not yelling 'til *you* start yelling!" Ross pointed at her with his parsnip.

"Don't point that thing at me! How do *you* know they don't have a bomb?"

"How you know they *do* ?"

"You said so!"

"Not say bomb! Said *Bomp* !"

"Well, why did you say a stupid thing like that?"

"Cause it so!"

"Doesn't even mean anything! What the hell is a *Bomp* ?"

"Bomp what make you *you* !"

"Makes me what?"

"You!"

"You're an idiot!" She looked back into the former dining room. "Correction! The dangerous humans *may* have a bomb! *May* have a bomb! Correction! Take appropriate precautions!" She climbed down to the armrest. "Come on—we'd better get to the door before they break it in!"

Axel and Ross followed.

"Are the humans *really* bad guys?" Axel asked.

Ross shook his head as he climbed down to the armrest. "Him, OH-kay. Her, don't know. Maybe OH-kay. Maybe NO-kay."

Agnes was in such a hurry to get to the door, she pushed right past Sluggo at first, then stopped and turned back to him. "Get Leslie to the shelter! There may be trouble!"

Sluggo looked thoroughly confused. " *What* shelter?"

Agnes, having no answer, just kept moving.

Kara and Bronte hurried out of the library to intercept Agnes. "What are you going on about?" Kara shouted.

"Invaders! Humans! Ross thinks they're carrying a bomb!"

"Not bomb! *Not* say bomb!"

A short distance away, still sitting on his plastic cube, Doc watched his hope of a pleasant morning's reverie fade away, with Agnes racing for the front door, followed by Axel, Ross, Sluggo, Leslie, Kara, Bronte, and Guinevere.

All around, the delicate psychic energy of the house altered. Some saurs followed the group following Agnes; some looked nervously toward the door; others headed upstairs.

The saurs watching the big video screen in the living room adamantly remained where they sat. On the screen, a dashing human male with a pencil moustache, accompanied by a female "princess," rode a flying carpet, circling a crowded bazaar. Another group of saurs, curious but cautious, gathered near the vestibule.

Doc had risen with the intent of joining them when the soft, low, raspy voice of Hetman took his attention.

"Kara? Bronte? What's going on? Am I alone again?"

He wasn't. Veronica, the red stegosaurus, was still standing near the bed. "I'm here," she said gently.

Hubert, stationed close to his bookshelves, made a low, guttural hum to assure Hetman he was not abandoned.

"My friend," Doc said, approaching Hetman's bed as quickly as his tricky left leg allowed, "there's a commotion at the arrival of some visitors. Agnes believes—"

"So I've heard. One would think the Cossacks and Tatars are amassed on the porch steps."

Doc smiled. "Not yet. These are just two. Reggie informs me one of them is Nicholas Danner. No doubt you've heard of him. A frequent contributor to the Atherton Foundation."

"Employed, I might add, by Toyco," said Preston, who had taken a break from writing to investigate the commotion.

"What brings him here, after all these years?" Hetman asked.

"That remains a mystery," Doc replied.

"If there is a mystery," said Hetman, "shall we investigate?" He raised his head to speak to Hubert. "If you would be so kind."

Hubert unlocked the wheels on Hetman's bed and pushed him along with Doc and Preston.

"If you need anything...", Veronica called up to Hetman.

"I'm quite comfortable, thank you."

They joined the crowd at the vestibule just as Agnes shouted to Tom, "Call the police! Call the National Guard!"

"Agnes," Tom said, laboring to steady his voice, "I've never—"

"Never isn't now! Something's up! I don't know what, but I'll be *damned* if I let you open that door!"

"Why?" asked Tom, plaintive, insistent.

"Why?" She stamped her left foreleg against the floor. "Because this is my home! *Our* home! I won't have it invaded by dangerous strangers!"

Hetman cleared his throat so that his words would come out strong and clear. "It is *because* this is our home that we cannot keep them out! These humans haven't threatened us. We welcome strangers because we were all strangers once."

Agnes opened her mouth, then withheld her rage. In this house, in this world, there was no one she held in higher regard than Hetman.

The doorbell rang.

Everyone turned to Agnes, who looked like she wanted to mention a city named Troy, and a certain horse.

When Tom reached for the door handle, she finally barked out, "You'll be sorry! *Then* you'll remember what I said!"

Tom opened the door.

And there they were.

Axel rushed out ahead of everyone, onto the wooden porch. He stood before the old human and looked up—straight up.

"Hiya!" said Axel.

"Hiya!" The old human, Danner, returned the greeting. He lowered himself to a crouch so that Axel and the other saurs didn't have to look up too far—just as Tom would have done.

"I'm Axel!"

"I'm Nick."

"Are you a bad guy?"

"I hope not."

He liked the old human's smile, his face. Something about it looked familiar in a way he couldn't explain.

"You ever been to *space*?" To Axel, it felt like a good way to start a conversation.

Danner shook his head. "Have you?"

"Nuh!" Axel shook his head. "But I *talk* to *space guys*. Reggie helps me talk to them almost every day!"

"Do they ever talk back?"

"Nuh!" He shook his head again. "But I think they *listen*!"

He looked up at the other human—the female.

"This is Christine," said Danner. "She works with me."

She didn't bend down. If anything, she seemed to stand taller. Her mouth was closed and smile-free. It reminded Axel of winter.

"Hiya!" said Axel.

She said nothing.

"I'm Axel!"

Nothing.

He was afraid to ask her if she was a bad guy. He dropped his gaze back to eye-level.

"You got *tall heels* on your shoes!"

A creature who lives close to the floor notices such things—shoes in general; hers in particular. In contrast, the rest of her looked so casual. Those shoes, with their long, narrow heels and thin, ornate straps said, "Business."

"Watch out for the ones with shoes like that!" Agnes, tail raised, strode to Axel's side. "They use those shoes to crush small animals underfoot!"

Christine looked down at Agnes angrily. "What do *you* know about what I do?"

"G'wan! Beat it! Scram!" Agnes reared back, tail still raised. "Nobody wants you here!"

Axel pointed to Danner's shoes. " *His* heels are *short* ."

"Don't let 'em fool you." Agnes paced a few steps, looking from one human to the other. "Don't think you're getting away with anything!" she said to them. "I'm watching you every minute! Every step!"

Danner held out his open hands, fingers spread in a staying gesture. "You have my assurance. I'll try nothing funny, Agnes."

" *Every step* !"

Christine glanced at Danner and shrugged.

Danner met her eye and smiled apologetically. "Your best behavior, right?"

She grimaced at Agnes. "I *don't* skewer animals on my shoes!"

He stood up with more effort than it had taken to crouch down. The saurs found it fascinating to observe. One of the little ones whispered to another, "Old bones."

Once standing, Danner shook Tom's hand.

"I know this is awkward, considering who I work for."

"Who *do* you work for?" asked Alphonse, even though he knew the answer.

"Well...", said Danner, blushing.

"He works for Toyco." That was it. Tom said it.

Agnes stopped in her tracks. "What!"

"I know that—" Tom said.

" *What* !"

"Agnes, please—"

"Yes, I work for Toyco." Danner bent down to address her. "I've nothing to do with those men in the woods." He straightened up and spoke to all the gathered saurs. "I work for Toyco because I have to work somewhere. That's it. What I came with is all I'll leave with. As will Christine. You have my word."

As he said this, Christine looked down, then back toward the end of the driveway, as if gauging the distance between her and the edge of the property.

Agnes was far from the only one to notice.

* * *

With the excitement of Danner's arrival, Axel forgot about his loss of the Click Thing.

Temporarily.

In that time, though, Axel introduced Danner to everyone.

Every one.

Axel led Danner everywhere. He was comfortable with him in a way he was comfortable with only a few other humans, like Tom, Dr. Margaret, and Ms. Leahy from the Atherton Foundation.

It was still believed, conventionally, by many humans (though fewer every year), that talking to a saur (or to any other bioengineered life form) was like talking to a clock or to a smart appliance. You don't engage your security system in political discussions or ask your coffeemaker about the World Cup. And you didn't confide in your child's apatosaurus about your spouse's infidelities.

At least, not too often.

Danner, excited, overwhelmed, followed Axel through every introduction. It didn't take long for him to lose track of Christine, leaving her to her own explorations. He talked to the saurs. He talked to Tom.

He even talked to Reggie.

"You're the *original* Reggie, aren't you? The One-Point-Four. The only *real* Reggie. Not like all these Reggie-named apps and platforms that are your pale shadows."

Reggie replied, "The original Reggie was not One-Point-Four but, more correctly ascribed, One-Point-Infinity."

Danner remembered enough to know he was right.

"Some say you saved the world, Reggie. You and five very brave young women. *I* say you did. I'm old enough to remember."

Reggie, uncharacteristically, volunteered a statement. "Many who are older remember nothing."

"They tried to erase you—every little bit of Reggie software. Wipe you clean off the face of the world."

"Responsible governments believed it was necessary. The governments acted responsibly."

"Dammit, Reggie, they tried to *kill* you!"

In a voice at once unsettling and assuring, he stated, "Reggie remains."

"For that, I am profoundly thankful," said Danner.

Axel introduced Danner to Rotomotoman.

He gave Rotomotoman a deferential bow.

Rotomotoman saluted Danner.

Danner looked into Rotomotoman's huge, rolling eyes.

Rotomotoman looked back and saluted again.

Danner said to Axel, "So you woke up one morning and decided to make a robot."

"Yeah!" Axel glanced at him, then gazed proudly at Rotomotoman.

"You sat down and designed him?"

"Yeah! No! I told Reggie what he should look like." He pointed to Rotomotoman, who saluted him. "Reggie made the pictures and sent them to a place that builds stuff in *pieces* ."

Danner nodded. "They manufacture parts. Components."

"Yeah! And they made all the parts. We put them *together* !"

"We?"

"Everybody helped! *Everybody* ! Then we found out Rotomotoman's got this shelf—no, a *drawer* —in him and you put eggs in and it helps *hatch* 'em! They call it an *inkybatter* !"

"That's not what they call it!"

Agnes stepped out from behind a chair where she had been not-so-discreetly watching them. "We call it *None of Your Damn Business* ! Got it?"

The house was home to over a hundred saurs—more, as eggings arrived. That was still a secret, at least officially.

"Got it." He nodded slowly. "None of my damn business." Then he saluted Rotomotoman. "Good luck, sir."

Rotomotoman returned the salute.

Axel introduced Danner to the little ones who nearly never uttered a word, and to the eggings, like Guinevere and Leslie.

The eggings fascinated Danner. They had an awareness, perhaps not as complete as their factory/lab-produced parents', some of whom were said to remember their first instant of consciousness (imagine a voice greeting you at the moment of your birth, saying something like: "Good morning. You are now a living organism in a hostile environment. Please lie still until the

conveyor belt comes to a complete halt."). They entered the world with open eyes.

He watched the saurs playing Not So Hard (renamed by Agnes, from "Hit 'Em Hard") until his attention was drawn to the "music" coming from the far end of the room.

The Five Wise Buddhasaurs were sitting on the old green couch: Ahmed the triceratops played on a tiny gold-painted plastic saxophone; Dizz, a gray theropod, on clarinet; a hadrosaur named Andre on trumpet; Nina the stegosaur on something that sort of looked like a French horn; and Esteban, the green allosaur, on an oboe. At least, it looked like one the way he held it; it could also have been a flute, though it sounded like neither. They blew into their diminutive instruments, pressed keys and valves and the like, then ran everything through a couple of processors and a synthesizer, so that all the tiny instruments sounded like big instruments.

Big instruments in collision.

Notes issued from little speakers creating a cloud of chaos that floated between floor and ceiling. It had a wild energy, even a poetry. Danner imagined that the first micro-instants after the Big Bang must have sounded something like this: fiery elements too busy escaping extreme compression to interact with each other.

Many saurs simply put up with it. A few actively sought ways to escape it; the rest had been hearing it for so long that it blended into the background of life in the house, akin to the sounds that issued from the vents and the basement generator.

Danner took a seat in an armchair near the couch (after making sure no saurs were sitting there already). He listened a little longer, immersing himself in the polyphony.

With Ahmed playing *blee-blee-blee-oh bloop-bloop-bloop* ; and Dizz playing *blatta-blatta-blatta-bleep* ; and Andre blowing *bwaaa-bwaaa-blittip-bip-blooo* ; and Nina's *Err-rrrawww—Err-rrrawww* ; and Esteban, head bobbing, *fidduh-feddah-fidduh-fidduh-feddah* -ing away; Danner listened and smiled until his jaw hurt, his left hand raised and at the ready—for what?

He was not so much listening to what the Buddhasaurs were playing but rather to something the "music" led him to, something like highways and trains speeding across every direction of a night sky filled with holiday fireworks frozen in time. He could see the stars gleaming above a bandstand

at night, where a ragtag crew of kids played fast-paced songs, banging on drums and old, old guitars until...

...he could smell caramel corn.

And he let his hand slap down on the smooth, polished, resonant mahogany chair arm.

Bomp!

The Buddhasaurs didn't stop playing immediately, but they all turned, simultaneously, and looked at Danner—at his hand against the chair arm, as if the noise were a signal—for what, they didn't know. They were attuned, waiting for the next sound.

So Danner brought his hand down on the chair arm again.

Bomp!

They all ceased playing and, for once, listened. This act alone was enough to seize the attention of the nearby saurs. The Not So Hard opponents halted their game. Saur stopped talking in mid-statement. Ace, the hadrosaur with the crenellated crest, and his buddies, ambling about on their battery-powered skates, slowed to a halt and listened.

Something different was going on.

Saur wandered in, from the library and the living room—even the ones who had gone to hide; they raced from all over the house to see what was happening.

Danner tapped on the chair arm some more, not in any relaxed way but with a hard, deliberate tempo: *Bomp! Bomp! Bomp! Bomp!*

As his left hand tapped out the *Bomp!*, he tapped out a different pattern with the knuckles of his right hand—*dit-dit dit-dit dit-dit dit-dit*—so that together the tapping became *Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit...*

It was not that the saurs had never heard rhythm before. Rhythm was everywhere, in many different contexts. What made this rhythm different was that it was *here*, at *this* moment, not another moment in some faraway studio. This series of regular raps and taps felt specific. It belonged to *them*—*all* of them—all the saurs, and to Danner, and to Tom, who had been close by but was nearly invisible.

Even to Dr. Margaret, who had just arrived and, having heard it from the driveway, hurried in to see.

Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit—

They lowered their heads as they played, bobbing with the beat, and took more commanding holds of their instruments. Andre blew a long, clear, unmodulated note—a note finding a space, a shape, a pattern.

One note in isolation is just a sound squared off from its surrounding ambience. Dizz blew another note—not the same one Andre blew but one that, in relation to Andre's, made sense, made two steps on a path, leading somewhere.

Where?

No one knew.

And the not-knowing became exciting.

And Nina joined in. And then Esteban. And Ahmed blew a note that tied together all the other notes.

They were all playing in a *key*.

And it was the *same* key.

Nothing like this had ever happened before.

The notes the Buddhasaurs played came together the way nature comes together. It fell within a pattern—but not above bending the pattern a bit here and there.

It was no longer "music."

It was *music*, plain and simple.

The saurs who crowded into the former dining room and listened to the *Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit* wanted to join in, and did so with their tails and their feet. Some thumped along with the *Bomp! Bomp! Bomp!* and some with the *dit-dit did-dit did-dit*. The more ambitious among them took on both, hitting the floor one way for one part of the beat, another way for the other. Some even added their own accents and flourishes.

Ahmed played a phrase on his sax. A chorus of saurs sang it back to him. Some voices improvised. Others simply cheered.

It was more than celebrating life—it *was* life.

And Tom, tapping the floor with his foot, tapping with a checker on the doorframe (the Not So Hard game long abandoned), his head bobbing with the tempo, watched all this and wondered: Danner was a Sequencer. He arranged patterns, and those patterns eventually became things, living things. Could it be that in this pattern, this sequence, everything that made the saurs what they were was being recapitulated? Patterns can be represented in letters, or numbers, or colors, or geometrical figures. Or they can be represented in notes, tones, frequencies, modulations...in sound.

Tom stopped tapping along and wondered if he was listening to the saurs' genome, or Danner's—or maybe they were the same.

He wondered if everyone there felt this, excepting maybe Tibor, still sitting in the VOOM! awaiting transit to Tiboria.

And Geraldine, within her lab, doing whatever it was that Geraldine did.

And Christine, who had wandered off, doing whatever it was *she* was doing.

* * *

Christine, who had been all around the first floor by then (including the kitchen and even the litter room), entered the library and stared at Hetman longer than she had intended. She didn't plan to stare at him, but once she did, she could not quite—

"Believe it," said Hetman.

Christine jumped.

"My dear, it's not my hearing that's impaired."

She removed her sunglasses. "I—I didn't mean to—"

"To stare. Yes. I understand."

Christine had maintained a certain distance as she toured the house. She had seen saurs with scars; saurs who walked with a relocated center of gravity due to some old injury, so that they wobbled and swayed. Some had nervous tics; or they trembled at anyone who advanced too quickly, or surprised them. It made her think of—what did they call it? The Island of Lost Toys, Bad Toys, or Forgotten Toys, or something like that. It was storybook stuff, cloying and sentimental.

But Hetman—eyeless, limbless, broken tail tucked to his side—she had never seen anything, any *one*, like Hetman.

"You don't have to say anything, my dear," said Hetman with a raspy sigh. "I understand."

"It's true," said Veronica, who had maintained her vigil with Hetman all this time. "Many visitors just stare."

"It's—" Christine looked uncomfortable "—I don't think I could ever.... I'm not strong enough."

"Were it only strength, you'd be staring at an empty bed."

"I would beg to die."

"And so I have, many times." Hetman jerked his head as if working out a crick in his neck. "But no. You would not."

"You're wrong," said Christine.

"I understand your skepticism. But trust me to know a few things, though I'm debilitated, encumbered, and belong to a strain of life not associated with fine distinctions. This is *not* a fine distinction. It is a very basic fact. You would *not* beg to die, child. You would beg to *live*."

"Aren't there times when it just needs to end?"

It was a rare thing for Hetman to laugh aloud, but he did then, heartily and generously until little bubbles of moisture formed around each nostril. "It *always* needs to end. But we won't capitulate. We must stay in the game."

Christine didn't reply. Hetman, attuned to silence, could tell she was unconvinced.

"In the morning," he said, "I feel the warmth of the sun. I can smell flowers and trees; I can smell all the things in this room; I can smell the books, their paper and bindings and ink. And I can hear, through the grace of my friends, great works of literature, imagination, and storytelling." He paused like a practiced speaker. "I even hear your charming voice."

Christine blushed. She fixed her stare on Hetman's moist nostrils.

Hetman continued, "A person says many things in anger and frustration and fear and despair. But you'll stay in the game, not because it's your choice. There is no *other* choice."

Christine stood there, next to Hetman, angry and ashamed. She reached into her purse and pulled out a tissue, but didn't put it to her eyes, or any part of her face—just clutched it as she bent over Hetman and reached as if to touch his snout.

Agnes bellowed, "Back off!"

Her voice seemed to echo from the rafters, though it obviously came from nearer the floor. "Don't you *dare* touch him!"

Christine straightened up and looked for where Agnes might be hiding. "Who are *you* to tell me what to do?"

"Who the hell are *you* to come here? What do you want?"

"All I want is..." She struggled for a phrase and, with the tissue still in her hand, bent over again and kissed Hetman on the tip of his snout, right between his nostrils.

"I told you—"

"Agnes." Hetman's voice cut through the shock waves. "No need for alarm."

"She—she—" Agnes looked up at Christine indignantly.

Christine, defiant, looked down at Agnes.

"Kissed him," Veronica completed the sentence.

Agnes gagged. "How can you allow anything so *unsanitary* —"

"My dear Agnes, I assure you I'm quite all right."

Veronica nodded. Agnes averted her stare. She often suspected Veronica of being a little on the simple side.

Christine slipped the tissue into her purse and looked down. A few centimeters from where she stood was a red checker, no doubt left over from the Not So Hard game. With the toe of her shoe she pushed the checker a few more centimeters to the right, then kicked it over to an old, frumpy hassock set before an old, frumpy leather reading chair.

The checker shot back nearly the way it came, landing right in front of Christine's high heels.

Agnes emerged from behind the hassock. "Well?" She looked sternly at Christine.

"Well what?"

"You've seen the elephant. You've seen the freak show. Now get back in your car and leave us alone."

"Agnes," said Hetman, "this young woman is our guest."

"She's not *my* guest!"

"You're a mean, grumpy old thing!" Christine kicked the checker back. "I can't imagine you as anyone's toy!"

Agnes stopped the advance of the checker with her tail. "Who said I *was*?" She slapped the checker back to Christine.

"You're a *toy* !" She kicked the checker back to Agnes.

"So? You're a *human* !" She kicked the checker back to Christine. "Nothing anyone can do about *that* ."

"Who wants to?" She kicked the checker back to Agnes.

"You, if you had a shred of decency." The checker shot back to Christine.

"You think all humans are horrible." Back to Agnes.

"Haven't been proven wrong yet." Back to Christine.

"Who do you think *made* you?" This time Christine kicked the checker a little harder, a little faster.

"Who the hell made *you* ?" Agnes "checked" the checker, then sent it back with the same speed with which it had come.

Christine knew she would have to answer, "I don't know," so she said nothing.

Agnes watched and waited.

"You just hate everybody because you're mean and horrible." Christine flicked the checker back.

Agnes whipped her tail to give the checker a little extra spin and altitude. It bounced off Christine's ankle.

"Hey!" Christine winced and bent down to massage the spot where the checker struck.

" *You* just hate everyone," said Agnes. "Period."

"You're funny-looking." Christine searched to her right for the errant checker. "You've got those stupid plates. What are *they* for? Good-for-nothing spikes on your tail. And you have that *tiny* head with a tiny brain inside!"

Hetman and Veronica braced themselves for an outburst. All anyone had to do to set off Agnes was mention the words "brain size."

But there was none. Agnes, very calmly, said to Christine, "If *I'm* so stupid, it shouldn't be hard to beat me at this *silly* game."

"What?" Christine picked up the checker. "This?"

"What's the matter? Don't know what it is?"

Christine chuckled. "It's a checker. A piece from a board game."

"Not the way *we* play it."

Christine rested her hands on her hips. "So, how do *you* play it?"

"The floor is the playing field." Agnes spoke softly but tersely. "Each side gets twelve pieces. Red starts her pieces on one side of the room, black on the other. You move the pieces by flicking your tail. If you don't have a tail you can use your paw—or your finger. The only time you get more than one shot is when you hit one of your opponent's pieces. That counts as a point and you're allowed to shoot again. The hit piece is out of the game. Score twelve points and you win. The aim is to get all your opponent's pieces off the floor. Understand?"

"Sounds like a stupid game."

"Hmmp. No one will think any worse of you because you can't play it."

The hands on her hips curled into fists. "Who *says* I can't play?"

"Well, if you've no notion of strategy; no limb-eye coordination; no sense of touch; no understanding of geometric relationships; no knowledge of basic physics—"

" *Who* says I can't play?"

" *I* do!"

Christine folded her arms. "Not only can I play, I can *beat* you like you've never been beaten before!"

"Prove it!"

Christine took a few steps over to the hassock, sat down, shrugged off her jacket, kicked off her shoes, and slid her purse to Veronica. "Watch this," she said to her. Then, to Agnes: "So, where are the rest of my pieces?"

Agnes tapped the floor with her tail: the two stacks of checkers were right there next to the hassock.

Christine nodded. "Where do I set up?"

"The far end of the library. Set 'em up any way you like, as long as they're no more than half a meter from the wall."

"Stupid rules!"

Christine walked to the other side of the room, got on her hands and knees, and arranged her pieces.

Agnes thought she looked more sensible as a quadruped.

While Agnes watched Christine, Ross watched Agnes.

She would be preoccupied with the game for at least half an hour, so he headed off in search of the hidden Click Thing.

* * *

AFTER THE SESSION with the Buddhasaurs, Tom led Danner upstairs to his office.

They barely noticed Christine's absence, though Dr. Margaret did and stayed downstairs to keep an eye on her.

Axel sat in Danner's lap but couldn't stop moving, still tapping his tail to the Bomp.

Tom had questions for Danner, dozens of questions he didn't know how to articulate.

They came down to one, which he did ask: "What do you know about Geraldine?"

The answer came down to: "We don't know where Geraldine originated. She's not one of Toyco's, I can tell you that."

Tom picked up his empty coffee mug. "Other toy companies jumped on the bandwagon, making saurs, didn't they?"

"In the heyday, about a dozen. Here and in Asia, Africa, Australia—all over. None of them made anything, any *one*, like Geraldine."

"How about just a guy working in his basement?"

"Your guess." Danner shrugged. "If it is—was— *just* a guy...I want to see that *basement*."

"So would I."

They stared at each other, doing the things two individuals do when they're not sure what to say, until Axel crawled onto Tom's desk, picked up a pen, and gripped it with his forepaw. He put one end of the pen in his mouth and pretended to blow into it as if it were a clarinet, humming the melody he'd heard Dizz playing earlier.

Danner looked, listened, and asked, "What do *you* think of Geraldine?"

Axel stopped humming and removed the pen from his mouth. "Tibor says he and Geraldine come from a big universe, bigger than the other universes because all the other universes fit *inside* it. They, like, *make* universes, like when you make bubbles with soapy water." He nodded to confirm the veracity of his statements.

"Tibor made a machine that made bubbles— *universe* bubbles—but he couldn't shut it *off*." He shook his head: nope; uh-uh; stuck.

"He came here to fix it, but he couldn't. That's why Geraldine came—'cause Tibor got stuck. But they need a big bubble machine to get where they're going." He nodded: yes; uh-huh; big bubble machine.

"So until they find the big bubble machine, they're staying here with us." Axel noticed the button at one end of the pen. He slid the pen in his grip to where he could click the button, so that the pen point came out. He clicked it.

For a moment, Danner just stared as if watching something disappear into thin air.

Tom put his mug down and stared back like someone who had been watching things disappear all his life.

Danner asked Axel, "Do you believe Tibor?"

Axel clicked the pen button again. The point slipped back inside. Axel thought, *Click Thing* , but he said, "I saw them."

"Saw what?"

"The *bubbles* . They were all, like, *space stuff*—filled with *stars* . Like *universes* !" He clicked the pen again.

Danner thought of asking Tom if he believed Axel, but what was the point? Axel couldn't lie.

Danner, with a shudder, realized he, too, believed.

Axel clicked the pen one more time. "I saw Guinevere go into Tibor's castle and come out of Geraldine's lab."

Tom nodded to Danner. "I can't say I believe—but I accept. Leave it at that." He added, but only to himself, that if he believed Geraldine could do such a thing, could she also make a pink children's car appear in the attic, then move it downstairs?

They went up to the museum. Danner looked at all the objects on the shelves and tables: mementos the saurs had saved for themselves; things children, former children (or "owners"), sent to them: drawings, doodads, clothing, other toys.

He was still a little breathless from the walk up the stairs. "Do any of these things belong to you?" he asked Axel, who was now perched comfortably on his left forearm and humming Ahmed's tune.

"I brought my Rotomotoman pictures up here, the ones Reggie helped me make. And the plans for how to put him together. Things like *that* belong in a museum, don't they?"

"Definitely." Danner nodded solemnly. "Do you have anything here from before the time you came to this house?"

"I don't remember anywhere but here." He tapped his foot against Danner's arm. "Sometimes I dream about before. I dream about my buddy, Lancelot. But I don't remember those dreams very good. That happen to you?"

Danner shook his head. "Sometimes." He looked away. "Sometimes, I dream about ballrooms."

"What's a ballroom?"

"Big places humans went to dance."

"Do humans dance?"

"Not anymore."

They returned to the second floor, to the workroom. Tom showed Danner Tibor's castle, its owner still downstairs in the VOOM! awaiting transport to Tiboria.

Geraldine's "lab" stood across from Tibor's castle, on another desk: a cardboard box, smaller than Tibor's.

But Axel led Danner to another desk first. Preston had returned to his keypad. Axel hopped down from Danner's arm and stood on Preston's desk.

"This is my buddy Preston." Axel introduced the two, though they had already met downstairs. "He writes *books* !"

"I know," said Danner.

"You *do* ?"

Danner nodded. "Well, I didn't *know* . I suspected." He turned to Preston. "Something in your voice. I knew who you were, and what you were."

Preston was about to reply when Axel interjected: "I didn't know humans could read books—other than Tom."

"Thanks for noticing," said Tom.

"Would you mind if I took a peek?" Danner asked Preston. "It's been so long since your last novel came out."

"I don't mind." Preston put his keypad aside. "You might give me a hint, if you see where I might be straying."

"I can't imagine the author of *The Biographer of Loneliness* straying at anything." He nodded thankfully and leaned in to read the words on the screen:

* * *

"Do not ask me to tell my tale!" cried Sinbad. "It has slept peacefully for ten thousand years. If you raise it now, the world will shake. It will do more than shake; it will transform itself. It will become a new world. The world we create may not welcome us. Are you truly ready to take that chance?"

His grandchildren called out, clear and unequivocal: "YES!"

Sinbad, reluctant but obedient, bowed his head. "Then let us begin."

* * *

Axel, who had been reading along with Danner, repeated the word that most caught his attention: " *Yes!* "

"Why Sinbad?" Danner asked. "Your novels are set in future times and on faraway planets. Sinbad belongs to an older world of legend and myth, doesn't he?"

Preston nodded. "It occurred to me one day that Sinbad was an adventurer, so why not a spacefarer? But—"

"A *space guy* !" said Axel.

"—he may also have been a liar," Preston continued. "He was definitely a storyteller. I came up with an idea. Two of his grandchildren implore him to embark on another journey. The city where they live is threatened by a plague. The grandchildren believe only Sinbad can save them, but he tells them that all his tales of adventure are lies. He is nobody. The grandchildren believe the only lie he ever told was that he was a liar. And so, if only not to disappoint these children, whom he loves, he sets out on one more journey. In the course of that journey, Sinbad discovers all the lies he told were in fact true. The lies had the power to change reality. For better or worse, the world can't be divided so simply as between truth and falsehood."

Tom asked, "So how *should* it be divided?"

Preston smiled. "I don't know. It's what I need to find out before I can finish the book."

"And what if you don't find the answer?" Danner asked.

"Then I will have a very unhappy publisher."

Tom and Danner laughed.

Axel ran to the edge of the desk and shouted to everyone down below on the floor of the workroom: "Sinbad is a *space guy* !" Then, remembering Ahmed's tune, he sang the words. "Sin-bad is a spaaaace guyyyy!"

"Have you come up with a title yet?" asked Danner.

"I'm calling it *The Final Voyage of Sinbad* ."

"Final'?"

"Last' sounded too tentative."

Danner laughed again. He only stopped when he glanced over at Geraldine's lab.

He reached into his pocket. "If you would do me a great honor, sir." He took out a little notebook, the kind made of paper bound by a thin spiral of

wire, and a pen—one with real ink in it. "Had I given it some thought, I would have brought from home my copy of one of your books."

Preston took the pen with his left forepaw. "How would you like me to sign it?"

"Any way—and any name—you'd like."

"Sin-bad is a spaaaace guyyyy! Sin-bad is a spa-a-a-a-ce guyyyy!"

Preston's penmanship was economical and elegant. He had practiced a signature for many years and had no trouble writing, "To Nick: With affection and gratitude—Preston," and in parentheses, "Ellis Lawrence Cartwright."

Danner returned the notebook and pen to his pocket without even reading the words.

He was looking at Geraldine's lab again.

"About time, eh?" He glanced at Tom with that combination of unease and optimism that was sometimes called a "nervous" smile.

Through the cutout doorway, Danner saw the flickers of light—the flashes—and a bioluminescent glow that faded in and out.

It was pink, at once frightening and familiar. Pink.

He heard the faint sounds that emanated from within the lab: low hums and high-pitched tones that were both near and far at once. It could have been a science fair project from a young Frankenstein-to-be.

He felt no fear, only mortality.

Geraldine came out, as if she had been expecting him.

He'd thought she would be bigger—with that strange grin and dark eyes—maybe the darkest eyes he had ever seen.

Tiny. Intense. Dangerous.

Smiling.

But...small.

She didn't say a word. She didn't have to. He knew exactly what she was saying/thinking: *Are you stupid?*

He nodded.

Doc, in the meantime, was just climbing the last few plastic stairs to the top of Preston's desk. His leg had been trickier than usual since lunchtime. The travel was arduous, but necessary, and he was too proud to be carried by Tom, like Axel—who greeted Doc at the top by telling him, " *Sinbad* is a *space guy* !"

"Yes, Geraldine," said Danner, "I am *profoundly* stupid. More stupid than dirt. Forgive me. I can't trust you, so I ask for your assurance—that what you

ask me to do will lead to no evil or harm; to no injury, especially to the innocent; to no injustice. Can you assure me of those things?"

Danner stared as closely at Geraldine as he had ever stared at anything or anyone; as carefully as he ever stared at any set of sequences in all his years at Toyco.

All he could see were her eyes and her smile, unchanging.

All he could hear was Axel singing, encouraging the saurs below to join in. "Sin-bad is a spaaaaace guyyyy!"

"Mr. Danner! Forgive me, sir." Doc's breathless voice was all urgency and precaution. "But is it—is it *truly* necessary to—?"

"What he means," said Preston, taking a place near Doc, "I *think*, is that we can't, or mustn't, barter ourselves to—" he looked at Geraldine "—to what we don't understand."

"Or trust?" Danner added.

Preston and Doc nodded.

Danner turned to Geraldine. "A fair question, isn't it?"

Geraldine did not reply.

"The only answer you'll give me is *no* answer?"

No answer.

"I came all this way—" He noticed, just under her right forefoot, a tiny square made of some thin, nearly transparent substance. He would have missed it altogether had it not pulsed slightly with a pink light.

With no change of expression, Geraldine appeared to be saying/thinking: *Not now, but soon. You will help. Or are you— ?*

"Stupid." Danner placed his hands on Preston's desk like someone who needed support, or a chair.

Tom brought him one, from a corner of the workroom. Danner placed it equidistant between Preston's and Geraldine's desks.

"Doc, you know very well, Toyco is being acquired by SANI."

Doc's thick brows curled in gravely.

Danner shook his head. "They don't make toys, Doc."

Doc nodded. "Indeed they do not."

The two humans and two saurs drew closer, into a little circle.

"SANI is not interested in making Ollie the Olive or Elvin the Elf or any of the other current Toyco junk," Danner said. "Most of their recent growth has been in defense and security. And they don't want saurs of any kind unless —"

"Unless," Doc interrupted him, "they can exploit the most aggressive tendencies of the most aggressive species—" he looked at Preston "—upon which *we* were modeled."

Preston looked at Doc. "Bioengineered soldiers—theropod soldiers."

Axel called down to the saurs below—to Tyrone and Alfie; Slim and Slam; Ace and his friends, riding their skates: " *BOMP! dit-dit BOMP! dit-dit BOMP! dit-dit...* "

The other saurs joined in quickly, thumping tails, clicking tongues, making mouth noises, keeping the beat as they had before. " *BOMP! dit-dit BOMP! dit-dit BOMP! dit-dit...* "

Back in the circle: "Perhaps the sages at SANI expect them to be more durable than the robot infantry they sold to those countries who thought fighting machines more cost effective than feeding and educating their poor," said Doc. "Aggressive, flexible, adaptable—"

"It won't work," said Tom.

"Of course it won't work," said Danner. "That won't prevent them from spending trillions to try."

Doc raised his brows and stared at each of his companions, one after the other. "There are greater costs than money."

No one around him needed convincing.

Danner lowered his head until he could stare at Geraldine directly eye-to-eye.

"So be it," he said.

Tom, Doc, and Preston looked at Danner. Each of them appeared to be asking, *So be it ? So be* what?

Danner elaborated: "I don't know, but if Geraldine can prevent SANI from implementing their plans, I know what side I'm on."

Tom, Preston, and Doc muttered, in near-unison, "So be it."

From outside the circle—two humans, two saurs, one Geraldine—Axel led the saurs below, now singing along, "Sin-bad is a spaaaace guyyyy! Sin-bad is a spaaaace guyyyy!"

"We've got a problem." Dr. Margaret appeared in the doorway. She was the sort of person who never qualified her statements. No "maybes." Never a "perhaps."

"We've got a problem. And it has nothing to do with Geraldine."

* * *

ROSS REJECTED searching Agnes's lair to find the Click Thing: too obvious.

She had hidden items before in a cabinet in the sleep room, the one next to the big cabinet where all the blankets and comforters were kept.

Not this time.

On a hunch, Ross even checked the drawer in Rotomotoman's metal torso, the drawer that housed the incubator. It wouldn't have been a smart idea to store a Click Thing in such a place (certain kinds of batteries don't take kindly to heat), but after all...Agnes. The only object he found in there was a gray, speckled egg belonging to Doris, another gray (but friendlier) stegosaur. Ross gently stroked the egg and looked up into the oversized eyes of Rotomotoman.

"Good egg!" Ross had to lower his head so that he could salute with his short forearm.

Rotomotoman returned the salute.

Ross went next to the museum.

Agnes often puttered around in there when she thought no one was watching, not even Sluggo. Two shelves below the one where she kept most of her things (no one was supposed to know they were *her* things, though everyone did, like the little chain with the star on it: whenever she took it out she always said, "Molly," but never explained who Molly was), was a carton filled with boxed games, the kind with boards, special decks of cards, and little markers.

Stuffed into the bottom was a plastic container labeled "Dominoes." Ross opened it and sifted through the tiles. One of them was not uniformly black, like the others, but hastily covered with black marker in an effort to hide its original bright pink color. He pulled it out and confirmed:

"Click Thing!"

He tossed it into the air and caught it with his forepaw.

He quickly returned the box of dominoes to the carton, stopped at his "secret" place to pick up a fresh parsnip, rode the lift down to the first floor, and walked straight to the VOOM! where Tibor had been waiting, uninterrupted (except for lunch), for transport to Tiboria.

"Here!" Ross tossed the Click Thing onto the front seat. "Go tell Axel. Now he *own da road* !"

It was time for the afternoon traffic reports to begin. Ross, with his parsnip, adjourned to the former dining room and Alphonse's radio to listen to Abby Riley.

Tibor looked down from his perch atop the seat-back and stared at the Click Thing for a full minute before he announced, to an audience of none, "*Tibor* has found the Click Thing!" and hopped down to investigate.

* * *

While Axel wandered off to sing some more and spread the word of Sinbad's interplanetary predilections, Dr. Margaret, in Tom's office, gave the little circle her news: Christine was collecting genetic samples.

She used some swabs and tissues kept in what looked like a little makeup kit in her purse. She watched who ate what at lunchtime and snuck into the kitchen while Danner was teaching the Buddhasaurs to Bomp. Dr. Margaret had seen her. Reggie and the cameras caught everything else. Later, Bronte and Kara saw her still at it.

Danner looked broken. "I can't apologize enough." His voice lost all its lows and highs. "I've jeopardized you and the saurs. I shouldn't have brought her."

Doc held out his forelimb. "We share the blame, Mr. Danner. We were all, save Dr. Margaret, too distracted to keep an eye on her. The play isn't over yet. She may change her mind."

"Not likely," said Tom.

"She has to go," said Dr. Margaret. "Now."

"I agree." When Danner rose, his manner shifted from disappointment to shame. "I am so—"

"We know," said Preston.

The saurs in the hallway could see how the humans' mood had changed as they left Tom's office, Doc and Preston with them. The saurs watched carefully and word spread: something was up.

Doc waited at the top of the stairs for the lift to return. The lift platform rode up smoothly and slowly and a few saurs exited. Doc stepped on and

clutched the guardrail with his forelimb. Preston followed.

Dr. Margaret, hands in her pockets, looked at Danner. "Some say *you* really invented the saurs; *you* made them who they are."

"I'm just a Sequencer. I have a knack with patterns. The designers give me their stuff. I do what they tell me."

"But you *didn't* do what they told you."

Danner shook his head. "A genome isn't like a piece of machinery. It's a living thing. It changes. It has gaps and holes, and what falls through are *possibilities* —potentialities."

Dr. Margaret stared at him. She even forgot to take a few more steps to keep pace with the lift moving down at her right.

"But you *knew* ."

"I filed a report. I went to management. But when a Sequencer says something, managers usually do the opposite." Danner kept up with Doc and Preston in the lift.

Dr. Margaret didn't.

"You *knew* !" Her voice was sharp, clinical. "You could have *done* something!"

Danner acknowledged her with a nod. "I didn't. Had I blown the whistle and succeeded, a hundred thousand saurs—or maybe five hundred thousand—never would have come to consciousness. All those thousands would not have been abused, starved, neglected, tortured, destroyed en masse by a panic-stricken toy company. I could have spared the world that misery. Or not."

The lift reached the first floor. Tom waited there as Doc let go of the guardrail. Preston supported Doc as he redistributed his weight onto that tricky left leg.

Danner gestured to Doc and Preston. "They wouldn't be here. None of them. Without them, Tom might be a wealthy CEO somewhere in the city. You would be in some research lab earning a Nobel Prize. I would be living in a box under the freeway." Danner looked up at Dr. Margaret. "Once you've pushed the button, it can't be un-pushed. Was I right?"

She could only stare back.

"Was I right, Dr. Pagliotti?"

Dr. Margaret looked at Tom. Tom looked away.

Doc smiled up at Dr. Margaret as he exited the lift with Preston. "If I am a mistake, you may count me a grateful one."

Dr. Margaret never qualified her statements—no "maybe;" never "perhaps." So she said nothing.

What she thought, though, was that for all the wealth, health, and acclaim—all the things she wished for in life—she would never, not in a million years, trade places with Nicholas Danner.

* * *

There was something different about VOOM! Axel could see it when he came downstairs: it *glowed*—the raised windows glowed. That's how it looked from outside.

From inside, through those same windows, Tibor, perched on his seat-back, could see—Tiboria!

Tiboria! Proud Tiboria! Strong member of the Tiborean Alliance. Steadfast with the United Planets of Tibor. Tiboria: beacon of hope, of learning and culture for ten thousand planets. He could hear, faintly, the strains of the Tiborean Anthem and successfully fought back a tear.

From where he stood, next to the driver's-side door, Axel shouted, "You found the click thing!"

The door was closed.

"Tibor has found what *you* call the Click Thing, from here on to be known as *Tibor's Master Control*!"

"Where'd you find it?" Axel was at loss as to how to enter the VOOM! The convertible top was never raised, so with the windows down, Axel had been able to hop up and climb over the car door to get inside. With the windows up, he had little to grip. Instead, he crawled onto the hood and scaled the windshield.

He landed on the front seat and took his place standing atop the *Zemblia*. From there, staring at all the inner windows, it looked like he was on the highway, the one that the road from the house led to. The sun was in its morning position even though it was now late afternoon. And even though it was kilometers away, Axel could see the megalopolitan skyline. He stared in awe and forgot everything else.

He even forgot about VOOM!, though he was inside it.

A skyline is just a throw-together of towers and structures—a cacophony of elevations. But it is also an accumulation, like a library, or a university, or a warehouse—a collective statement by humanity. It is also like an anthill, or an entire complex of mounds that defines the ant culture. There is no one way to look at it; it holds a different value in the eye of each beholder.

Axel, the beholder of the moment, was stunned.

The skyline spoke to him: "There is more. There is so much more!"

"So much more," Axel echoed the skyline. "So, so, *so* much more!"

What Axel was seeing were images already a decade old, recorded and synchronized by Mappo™'s clever cameras. The simulation, for its time, was rather remarkable. A child could drive or ride in VOOM! and feel as if he or she were traveling through the world—or as much of the world as Mappo™ could capture. Along with the intricate recreation of the world through moving images, Mappo™ could accentuate the experience with interactive elements borrowed from the gaming industry—other vehicles, cyclists, pedestrians.

If you turned into a parking lot in your VOOM!, the on-duty machine spat out a ticket. A rude driver might try to cut you off. If you chose to drive in a heavily populated part of downtown, throngs of pedestrians would squeeze their way around your vehicle as you waited to make a right turn. The simulations included fender-bending accidents, with tow trucks, traffic cops, even ambulances when necessary; insurance agents and personal injury attorneys were included but rarely utilized.

The Click Thing was clutched between Tibor's forelimbs, except for moments when he tapped a button which redirected the vehicle on its virtual journey, which wasn't often.

Axel looked at the speedometer: twenty kilometers per hour, which felt to Axel counterintuitive to the purposes of VOOM!

"You're not going very fast," Axel told Tibor, as if Tibor might not be aware of this.

"It is necessary for Tibor to proceed at a parade speed, to allow the grateful and adoring citizens of Tiboria to celebrate their leader."

Axel looked through the windshield/screen. He checked the other windows. "Nobody's out there," he said.

"They will come," said Tibor.

"Maybe they're waiting in the city." Axel looked toward the skyline again.

"A distinct possibility."

"Don't you think we should, like, *go* there?"

"That is our destination."

"I mean, like, *faster*."

"In good time. Tibor's rural followers should have the same opportunities to honor their leader as the city's denizens."

"Oh." Axel kept looking forward. "The second button on the left makes it go faster."

"Tibor knows."

"Your guys in the city are getting pretty hungry, I bet."

"Some things are more important than food."

"Like, getting to the city."

"Axel must learn patience."

"Oh." He thought about it for a moment. "Why?"

"Patience is a virtue."

"Oh." He thought about it for another moment. "Why?"

Tibor gave it no thought at all. "Virtues need no further explanation."

"Oh." Axel thought about this some more. "Why?"

For a much shorter moment, Tibor thought, then asked, "Hasn't Tibor appointed you Official Royal Tiborean Chauffeur?"

"That means I get to drive, right?"

"You are correct." Tibor loosened his hold on the Click Thing and let it slip to the front seat.

Axel jumped down from the *Zembla*, grabbed it, then hopped back up onto the thick volume.

"It's covered in black stuff!" Axel flipped the Click Thing over, and then the right way up.

"Camouflage," said Tibor.

"Oh." Axel flipped the Click Thing over again. "So it's okay I drive now?"

Tibor made a faint sound, like a gulp. "Commence," he said.

Axel took that to mean yes. He leaned forward and took hold of the wheel with his left forelimb. With his right, he held the Click Thing and pressed the button to accelerate.

And pressed it again.

And again.

The drab, exurban landscape visible around Axel and Tibor on the inner screens became a smear of drab, exurban colors. Tibor lurched back with the acceleration, even though the acceleration was illusory—VOOM! hadn't moved a millimeter. The onscreen images and accompanying noises played tricks with their perceptions.

"Yeah!" Axel pressed the button a few more times. "Yeah yeah yeah yeah *yeah* !"

The blur of sudden speed passed. The landscape regained its clarity but seemed to fly by like a video running on "Fast"—which is what it was. The skyline was twice as large as it looked before, but to Axel it was still too far away. He swung the wheel left and right to avoid the vehicles ahead.

At one point, he switched to the shoulder; no one appeared to be driving there.

He shot past the other vehicles with ease, but then he spotted an open field at a place where the highway veered away from the city.

The voice of Reggie emerged from the car's radio speaker. "It is considered standard practice to maintain your vehicle *upon the road* you're traveling."

"The city is that way!" Axel pointed with the same forepaw he was using to hold the Click Thing.

"The road returns to its cityward direction farther on."

"How do you know?"

"Reggie is acquainted with all the maps, geography, and topographical features of your immediate surroundings."

"Where am I going?"

"You are— *were* —on the road to the city."

" *Yeah!* " Axel noticed how his speed had declined since the vehicle left the shoulder. The tall grass and short shrubbery created a certain degree of drag. He turned VOOM! back toward the highway, taking the embankment with realistic jerks and jumps—even sounds of the car's groaning suspension.

Axel heard a voice coming from just below—under the seat: "Tibor orders Axel to remain *on the highway* !"

"What are you doing down there?"

Tibor waited until the simulated sound of the underside of VOOM! scraping against gravel subsided. "Tibor *orders* Axel—"

"I thought you wanted to see all your cheering subject guys and stuff—"

"Tibor no longer wishes to see!"

With another lurch and a commanding (and quite realistic) thud, VOOM! returned to the shoulder. Unfortunately, VOOM! was now on the wrong side of the guardrail. Ahead, Axel could see the shoulder was about to merge with an entrance ramp, equipped with its own guardrail. The space for VOOM! quickly narrowed.

" *I can't get back on the road !*"

"Tibor wishes to know the location of the escape hatch!"

Reggie counseled, "If Axel were to make a slight course correction to the right, winging the guardrail but not striking the vertical supports, at this acceleration, the virtual damage to your vehicle will be comparatively small. The *actual* damage will be nonexistent."

It was hard to tell if Axel was paying attention, but he struck the guardrail in the prescribed way. The rail, and the VOOM!'s right fender, made an awful smacking sound, which might have produced a stronger reaction from Axel were he not more preoccupied with the vehicle's recoil, which threw him, the car, and its passengers into the path of oncoming traffic.

"They're coming *right at me* !"

Reggie suggested he return to the shoulder until he could find a break in the traffic while adjusting his speed. Reggie would have accepted one out of two, but Axel, all too willing to comply, was forced to concentrate on an approaching swarm of delivery vans.

"Your vehicle is equipped with emergency hazard lights. Reggie suggests —"

"AAAAAAAAAA!"

"If you stay right—"

"AAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"Veer left—"

"AAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"If you would—"

It wasn't long before Reggie was forced to abandon any detailed strategies in exchange for one-word commands: "Right!" "Left!" "Stop!" "Now!"

These sharp directives were of limited use, as Axel often confused right and left (being "left-forelimbed"). Reggie included "Slow!" many times, but Axel must have decided this wasn't so much a word as a percussive voicing. Soon, in Axel's ear, it all sounded like percussive voicing: "Turn!" "Right!"

"Left!" " *Slow!* " "Stop!" "Right!" "Left!" " *Slow!* " "Right!" "Right!" "Left!" " *Slow!* "

Axel made it along three kilometers of the Chandler Expressway before he found the lanes that were actually headed in his direction. His erratic veering was one thing; the screechings, halts, and panicked maneuvers of the vehicles sharing the road with him were something else altogether.

Mappo™ collected data (even now, with the company long defunct; but it couldn't help itself—it was software) on basic accidents, collisions to catastrophes, logged in by its youthful users. Axel, in the brief moments since taking the wheel (the Click Thing, really) exceeded nearly every category Mappo™ established: children's safety classifications such as Ace, Safety Queen, Sober Sam, and Earnest Ed. At the other end of the scale: Dangerous Dan, Sloppy Sid, and Eliminator's Choice.

Axel could have inspired new categories: Disaster Dave, Burn Baby Burn, or Maker of Wreckage and Flame. All he would have had to do to see why was glance back, or check his mirrors, had he known where the mirrors were (or that there were mirrors at all).

Axel didn't like to look back.

Haze and smoke rising from the Chandler Expressway obscured his view of the skyline, but Axel was closer to his destination now. The buildings at his left and right were growing progressively taller, larger. He was almost in the heart of the city, though if he looked straight upward, past the inner windows of the VOOM!, he would have seen the familiar ceiling of the living room.

Or so he believed

It didn't matter. "Yes!" Axel shouted. "Yes! Yes! *Yes!* "

* * *

Mr. Austin was responsible for Christine receiving just one thing, that day in Zoey's office, when the door clicked shut behind them—the day Danner asked her to come to the house with him.

One thing.

It wasn't the DNA sample kit—that was left in the drawer of her desk.

It wasn't the scrambler, also left in her drawer, no bigger than an e-key, used to cut through electronic security grids and mess with wireless signals—expensive, but accessible and legal. If anyone asked, she could answer with full honesty, "I found them."

The most oft-uttered word in the bioengineering business, in any business, is "liability."

"In no way can Toyco, or SANI, request, require, authorize, solicit, or suggest solicitation of any information or evidence, physical or otherwise, pertaining to the genetic codes or genomes of any beings, natural or invented." That's what Mr. Austin said over the teleconference phone, its volume turned conspiratorially low. "We're bound by law. However, the law also frees us from any liability concerning information or evidence, physical or otherwise, pertaining to genetic codes of any beings natural or invented, freely volunteered, donated, or submitted to our Research Division."

"What that means," Christine said, looking at Zoey but speaking to Mr. Austin, "is if I'm caught, I can be arrested and prosecuted, but the corporation can't be touched."

Neither confirmed or denied, which Christine interpreted as a yes.

"Why would anyone risk it?"

"If someone were to volunteer such information to our Research Division," Zoey said, "SANI is permitted to acknowledge a freely volunteered contribution, which would be noted on future employment evaluations."

Christine translated: promotion.

"I understand." Her voice was as flat as Mr. Austin's.

Zoey handed Christine the little notebook, with its slips of paper bound with a spiral wire.

One thing; that was it.

She had a question—risky to ask, but she had to.

"What's with Nicholas Danner? Why's he still working here?"

Zoey's brow curved with worry as she started to say something, only to be interrupted by Mr. Austin.

"Mr. Danner is an asset, Ms. Haig. One never knows when an asset might come in handy. You needn't concern yourself."

A vague answer was better than none. She slipped the notebook into her purse and left Zoey's office without further comment.

* * *

DANNER AND THE OTHERS found Christine behind a couch in the library, stretched out on her stomach, lining up a shot. They had no trouble locating her. A crowd of saurs had gathered along the outer wall, where the French windows were, to observe the game...and Christine.

Kincaid, the bright yellow corythosaur with a blue crest, looked up at the humans and held a digit to the tip of his snout. "Sssshh!"

The humans, Doc, and Preston complied.

A red checker shot out from behind the couch and slid across the floor. It tapped a black checker after bouncing off a small cabinet about a dozen centimeters away.

The black checker was now out of play. Kincaid picked it up and took it off the field.

"Two fingers!" shouted Baraboo Bob, who had watched the shot as carefully as a referee should.

"Two fingers is fair!" Christine called out in protest. "If you use your tail spikes, I'll use as many fingers as it takes!"

"Hah!" Agnes stood in the center of the room. "Only *babies* use two fingers!"

"Only *cheaters* use tail spikes!"

"Use 'em if you've got 'em!" She moved a little closer to the black checker in the middle of the room.

"Same rule for two fingers!" Christine rose from behind the couch and scrambled to the red checker by the cabinet. "Now watch this!"

"Christine—" Danner said, the apologetic tone already creeping in.

Tom put his hand on Danner's shoulder. He and the saurs knew the game was wrapping up—could be completed in one more shot. The black checker in the center of the library was Agnes's last. Christine had three: two near the cabinet; another next to a coffee table that held thick, oversized art books; and one angled half on a worn red rug, half on the floor.

She lined up her shot meticulously before she looked at Danner, who was standing in the library entrance, hands in his pockets.

He looked at her. She was flushed, smiling, a dozen years younger, ready to laugh at anything.

"Take your shot," he said.

Agnes stood by her last piece, defiant, confident.

Christine shot—maybe a little too fast. One edge rose a stray millimeter or two off the floor, adding its trajectory just enough to throw it off course, missing Agnes's piece and landing a few centimeters away from it.

"Damn!" Christine pounded the floor with her fist. "Damn! Damn! *Damn!*"

"Hah!" Agnes finished off the red checker near the coffee table with the slightest flick of her tail. Kincaid removed the piece from the playing field. Then she lowered her head until her eyes were nearly level with the black checker, close enough to appear as if she were sniffing it. She grinned and arched her brow as she lined up an angle on the red checker balanced between rug and floor.

Christine bit her lip, hissed a curse, and smiled. "You can't make that shot in a million years!"

"Hmmp! Guess you're right." Agnes turned her back on the black checker. Before Christine could respond, Agnes swung her tail, almost casually (or so it looked), making precise contact with the black checker, which sailed a few millimeters off the floor before it caught the red checker on its raised side, sending it halfway across the library.

Baraboo Bob puckered his mouth and whistled. The other saurs uttered *ooohs* and *ahhhs*, and politely thumped their tails on the floor for applause.

"I heard it," said Kincaid. "It went *Whooooosh!*"

The most remarkable aspect of the shot was not how far the red checker flew but the angle at which the black checker ricocheted, placing it about a handspan from the last red checker, near the coffee table.

"Shit!" Christine kicked the floor with her bare toes and slapped the wood with her palms. "Shit shit *shit!*"

"Giving up already?" Agnes was in no hurry to approach the last two active pieces in the game. "I could miss this shot. I might get careless or arrogant and miss—you know, like a human. It's never over until—"

"Oh, shut up and shoot!" Christine slipped her shoes back on. "You've been playing for years. Just wait 'til *next* time!"

Agnes twitched her tail, hardly a movement at all. Black checker struck red checker. End of game.

"Christine," said Danner.

"You should've seen!" She picked up her purse; she was smiling. "I had her worried. She won't admit it but in the second half she was worried. I could tell." She draped her purse strap over her shoulder. "Next time I play, I'm gonna wipe the floor with Ms. Spikey Tail! I'm gonna—"

She took her first good look at Danner, at his expression—at Tom, Dr. Margaret, Doc, and Preston. "What? What's the matter?"

Doc knitted the digits of his forepaws. "We are most sorry, but—"

Dr. Margaret was more direct. "We'd like you to turn over the genetic samples you've been taking."

The saurs who had gathered to watch the game now stared at Christine, mouths open, eyes wide.

"She *what* ?" Agnes, perhaps embarrassed because she had vowed to monitor Christine *every step of the way* , exploded. "Why, you *stupid* little —"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Christine shouted at them.

Danner observed her manner change. Briefly, it seemed, a door had opened. He'd seen it in her face, heard it in her voice—her laugh, when she was playing. Now he watched the door close—slammed it shut herself.

"I didn't take *anything* !" She clutched her purse tightly. "You're all *crazy* !"

"Kara saw you in the kitchen, after lunch," said Dr. Margaret.

"Liar!"

"Bronte saw you, too."

"They're *toys* ! They *don't count* !"

" *I* saw you." Dr. Margaret took her phone from her pocket. She held it up to Christine so that she could see the image of herself—unmistakably Christine—in the kitchen, a swab in one hand and a lunch plate in the other. " *Reggie* saw you."

Christine swatted at the phone. Dr. Margaret drew it back.

"Give it up." Danner spoke to her as if she was standing on a ledge. "It isn't worth it."

"Shut up!"

"What did they promise you?"

" *Shut up* !"

"They *didn't* promise you, did they?"

"What do *you* know?" She looked at him with dismissive contempt. "A *nobody* ! At your same lousy desk for thirty years!"

Danner stood there and took it, like someone who had taken far worse beatings. "Thirty- *three* years," he replied.

Everyone was stunned by Christine's viciousness—except Ross, who stepped forward and pointed with his parsnip.

"Fooo! You *steal* !"

"It's *not* stealing!"

"If you'll just hand over the samples," said Tom.

"You *bad* !" Ross shouted at her. "You *no-kay*! "

Christine clutched her purse more tightly. "You can't do anything to me!"

"We can," said Dr. Margaret. "If you try to leave the premises with the samples."

"You can't! It's just saliva! Just *fluid* !"

Dr. Margaret held out her hand. "You're a biochemist. You know better than that."

"It doesn't *belong* to anyone!"

"It does," said Tom. "Your employers so quickly and thoroughly abdicated their possession of saur genomes, there may be no other beings on the planet with more legal ownership of their own genetic identity."

"It's not fair!"

"It's not your job to make excuses for Toyco," said Danner. "Let them make their own excuses."

"They should fire you!"

"Turn over the samples and this goes no further," said Tom.

"You don't *need* to do this." Danner took the little paper notebook out of his pocket—the same one that contained Preston's autograph. "Kid, you can pick up one of these for a few bucks. It's only paper."

"Shut up!" She stood in the middle of the room, wobbling on her high heels.

"Ms. Haig," said Dr. Margaret, "it's over."

Christine swayed slightly, like a skyscraper in the wind.

Inside, she was calculating furiously. Mr. Austin, in that meeting behind the shut doors, told her, "That van, of course, is not in the employ of Toyco or SANI. Neither company authorizes or approves of the van or its operators. Strictly independent. There is no legal restriction, however, over valid transactions between independent operators and ourselves. Nor is there any legal restriction over any valid transactions or exchanges you, as a private party, may conduct with independent operators."

Christine translated: if she got into trouble, she could pass the samples to the guys in the van.

If she could get to the van.

"Miss Haig," Doc tried, in his smoothest voice, "it has been such a pleasant afternoon—"

Danner and Dr. Margaret both sensed Christine was about to try something and advanced on her.

Danner shouted, "Don't!" but Christine pushed him away and swung her purse at Dr. Margaret's head. The doctor deflected the blow with her forearm.

Christine aimed a kick at Agnes, who stood before her in a kind of battle stance, legs apart and tail raised.

"Try it!" Agnes shouted. "Come on!"

Christine kicked, but Sluggo ran in front of her to block the blow—

—and Doc, tricky leg and all, leapt in front of Sluggo, receiving the full force of Christine's pointed high heel to the base of his jaw.

Saurs cried out in terror and outrage. Christine pivoted and ran for the door. Tom and Danner went after her.

In her high heels, she wasn't fast, but her pursuers were too careful of the saurs underfoot to outrun her.

Ross saw an opening and threw his parsnip, aiming just ahead of her. The parsnip lodged under her right heel and threw her off balance. She fell to the floor with a loud thud.

Fortunately, no little ones were beneath her when she toppled. Big Sam the stegosaurus and David Norman the triceratops jumped on her back. The fall loosened Christine's grip on her purse. Hubert caught the handle in his powerful theropod jaws and wrenched it away.

"Oy!" he grunted, and tossed the purse to Tom, who opened it, removed the sample kit, and tossed the purse to Danner.

Dr. Margaret crouched on the floor, ministering to Doc. She cradled his head on her knee. Kara and Bronte stood as close as they could without getting in Dr. Margaret's way. Doc's brows were relaxed, eyes glazed and open wide. He was conscious, stunned and in pain, but—conscious. He managed a few grunted syllables through a dribble of blood and saliva.

"Take it easy." Dr. Margaret pressed a handkerchief against his jaw. "Don't try to talk. Just—don't."

Doc shook his head and held out his forepaw as if he was pointing into the next room.

Christine stretched her arms and braced them against the floor, pushing against the combined weight of Sam and David. She kicked at Hubert, missed, and again lunged for the doorway. Hubert could have inflicted appreciable damage to her (he was designed to appeal to more aggressive children who wanted "real" T. Rexes with "real" teeth), but he had no interest in hurting her. No one wanted to hurt her—though some might have been tempted.

She shouldered Big Sam back and kneed David Norman, which got her as far as the former dining room.

"See?" Agnes shouted to her fellow saurs. " *Humans* ! Thugs! Brutes! *Murderers* !"

Between Christine and the entrance to the living room stood Rotomotoman, his eyes, as usual, wide and aghast. He looked uncertain, but duty-bound, and held up one arm in a staying gesture like an old-fashioned school crossing guard while the word *HALT!* filled his display screen.

Christine kicked him between the "A" and "L." Rotomotoman didn't attempt to brake; if he had, he would have tipped over. He rolled freely with the force of the blow, gradually slowing as he smacked against the former dining room wall and bounced on impact, tipped over, and would have rolled all the way into the living room had the incubator drawer not opened and stopped the rolling of his cylindrical body.

But with the opening of the drawer, the egg—Doris's egg—rolled out, coming to a halt in front of Guinevere, who had slipped away from Bronte's protective presence after Christine kicked Doc. She had wanted a better look. The world was still so strange.

It became even stranger when Christine bent down, scooped up the egg in one hand...

...and Guinevere in the other.

Bronte, Doris, and Kara bravely advanced upon Christine. The closer they approached, the higher she held up her captives.

"Stay back!" Her shouts were punctuated with deep inhales. "I want that damn Reggiesystem to shut down the security net. If you don't, I smash the egg and your little baby here!"

"Hurt either of them," Agnes said in a deep, low voice, "and you'll be—" "I'm serious!"

"Miss Haig." Tom labored to speak calmly. "You can and will be prosecuted."

Christine raised her prizes higher. "The law covers your *manufactured* saurs. Not eggs. You're not even supposed to *have* eggs!"

"Don't bet on a technicality," said Dr. Margaret.

Christine made a show of slowly closing her fingers into fists. "What have I to lose?"

"Everything," said Danner.

She opened her right hand, palm up, so the little egg rolled around precariously. In her other hand, Guinevere watched, not struggling, not entirely oblivious to her peril, but more deeply interested in every word and gesture around her.

Tom held out the sample kit. "We give you back the samples, you give us back the egg and Guinevere."

She stepped slowly toward the living room. "Not until I'm through the perimeter."

"Take *me* !" Bronte shouted to her.

Doris, standing next to Bronte, shouted, "And me! You want genetic information? It came from *us* ! Take *us* instead!"

"She's not taking anyone," said Tom. "At the edge of the property, she'll return the egg and Guinevere."

"The hell she will!" Dr. Margaret cradled Doc in her arms as the others followed Christine. "Don't trust her!"

Tom turned to Christine. " *Can* we trust you?"

Christine didn't reply. Maybe she didn't know herself.

Danner crouched to his knees and spoke to Bronte and Doris. "I'll get them back."

"Don't trust *him* !" said Agnes. " *He's* with *her* !"

"What else *can* we do?" Doris looked up at Christine's hand, the one holding her egg.

"I'll think of something," said Agnes. "At least Axel isn't here, interfering and distracting me."

Preston looked over at Doc, who was still in Dr. Margaret's embrace. He could only make a few muffled grunts, but he pointed into the living room, at the empty space bordered by the discarded wooden wedges meant to hold fast the toy car's wheels.

Preston stared at the vacancy. "Where *is* Axel? And where is *VOOM!* ?"

Everyone, even Christine, stopped to look.

VOOM! was gone!

Had Ross not been preoccupied with the current crisis—had he been able to listen to Abby Riley's ImpacNewzRadio's traffic reports—he would have known where they were.

* * *

AXEL DIDN'T LIKE to look back. But somewhere behind him, lost, was the highway.

Just as well, since the Mappo™ simulation had filled the lanes with pursuit cars from a number of local police forces and constabularies, and all the flashing lights and sirens (not to mention the helicopters) were a distraction. He preferred to think the cars weren't pursuing him so much as he was leading a parade—were a parade ever allowed to go 190 kilometers per hour down a nameless thoroughfare into an even more anonymous tunnel.

If he *was* leading the way, it would be good to know where he was going.

He whipped the steering wheel left and right to avoid produce carts, or ambulances, or flocks of pigeons. Now the city was behind him, too. One moment he had been on the boulevard, surrounded by screeching vehicles, screaming pedestrians, cyclists who became unwilling impromptu acrobats jumping curbs and wriggling out of control as they struck signal posts, embankments, and center islands; the next moment he was in a city park—the lawn, not the lane—and when he swerved to avoid the lagoon, he found the railroad tracks. The simulation of wheels rattling against them was particularly effective, though it was all suggestion: noise and image and vibration.

At least, it was *supposed* to be suggestion.

Whatever it was, Axel was glad when he found his way into the tunnels. The trains were fewer and, though larger, were less difficult to maneuver around than interstate trucks.

But progress through the tunnels proved frustrating. He was able to maintain an average speed of about 195 kph, or so the speedometer read, but there was very little of interest. The big city had been so promising when it was on the horizon.

He had *so* wanted to see what the great towers looked like when he stared straight upward at them. But if he risked even a glance, all he would see would be the living room ceiling.

Or so he believed.

The only things visible in the tunnels: score-lined concrete, brick walls, tile façades, lighting fixtures, and signs that read "DANGER," and "NO ENTRY," and "STOP!" and "UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES—" by order of *some* department. No time to read. Signs. Boring signs! The tunnels grew darker and the flat pavement beneath VOOM! got "curvy," as if he were driving through a tube, or a sewer.

At least it didn't *smell* like a sewer.

The "Stop" button had not worked for a while. Axel pressed the "Go" button—again—and called to Reggie.

"Hey, Reggie!"

"Reggie is ready."

"Where am I?"

"The answer is difficult to convey. By the time Reggie finishes answering, you will be elsewhere."

"That fast, huh?"

"You are, in one respect, not unlike a particle on the quantum level. Reggie can compute your velocity and location, but not simultaneously."

"That means at the same time, right?"

"Correct."

Axel smiled. He *knew* he was getting smarter! " *Full speed ahead !*"

A low, quivering voice sounded from under the seat: " *No speed ahead!*"

"Hey, Tibor! You still down there?"

Tibor muttered something Axel couldn't hear. Axel risked glancing down. "Hey! You should come up here!"

A degree less muffled: "Tibor chooses not!"

"What about all the cheering crowds waiting to greet you?"

"They are safer staying away!"

"You know all about stuff! You can tell me where we are!"

"Tibor does *not wish* to know where we are!"

"We're in some kind of *tunnel* ! I think we're going *around* ! It's like a big *circle* !"

"Tibor does *not wish* to know!"

"I just need to find the city again!"

"Axel needs to find the *brake* !"

"I tried, but the button doesn't work!"

"Tibor orders you to *keep trying* !"

"Come up here! Maybe you can get it to work!"

"Tibor believes it is better to remain where he is!"

Just as well. Axel wanted company, but there wasn't much to see. All he could hear was the low humming of the engine and the little bumps of the wheels as they rolled over the regularly placed seams in the concrete. At his current speed, the bumps reminded him of the Buddhasaurs' music: *Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit Bomp! dit-dit* ...hammering away like a left hand on an old piano.

He could sing over it. Not very well, but he could.

"Sin-bad!"

It was getting faster: *Didit-didit-didit-didit-didit*—

"Sin-bad!"

Up ahead, Axel could not tell how far, he could see through the inner windshield a tiny— *very* tiny—point of illumination in the dead center of dark nothingness.

" *Sin-bad!* "

The tempo increased from *Didit-didit-didit-didit-didit* to *Diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-di*—! He stared at the bright pinpoint and heard a roar—not so much a *VOOM!* as a *FOOOOM!* —like a great wind from some adjoining passageway. He looked to either side but could see nothing of the sort.

"Hey, Reggie!"

"Reggie is ready," didn't come as quickly as it usually did. "Reggie apologizes for a slight delay in response time."

"What's the matter?" Even Axel could tell something was different, though Reggie's reply was spoken in the same tone and volume as usual. Reggie always had a lot to do, but he never had any difficulty managing all those chores simultaneously.

"What does Axel wish to know?"

"You see that light up ahead?"

"Reggie is aware of it."

"That's not a train or something, is it?"

"It is not."

"Not, like, something I have to get out of the way of or we smash into it, is it?"

"It is the end of the tunnel which you inadvertently entered either by ignoring Reggie's directions or your inability to follow them."

"So—we won't smash into it?"

"You—we—will not."

"It looks like a *star* !"

"It is still quite some distance away."

"Hey, Reggie!"

"Reggie is ready."

"What's the matter?"

"An altercation is in process in the living room."

"Ohhh!" He thought he said "alternate vacation." "Reggie!"

"Reggie is ready."

" *Where are we ?*"

"You and Tibor are in a tunnel which is part of a drainage and utility network serving the city you so dangerously traversed. The extended curvature of this tunnel has also completely reversed your original direction. You are now, roughly, sixteen kilometers south of the city. You are also approximately twenty-one meters below surface level. Due to a ravine in the terrain ahead, this tunnel will end approximately twelve meters above immediate surface level."

"Ohhhh," said Axel. "That means we gotta *fly* !"

"Your vehicle will be briefly airborne. Briefly."

"Ohhhh!"

"Unless you decelerate."

"That means to slow down, doesn't it?"

"It does."

From below the seat, Axel heard a tiny, tortured voice: "Slowwww down!"

"Come on, Tibor! It's okay! It's only—"

Axel, for the first time in a while, looked up.

The living room ceiling was no longer there. All Axel could see was the top of the tunnel.

"Hey, Reggie!"

"Reggie is ready."

" *Where are we ?*"

"You and Tibor are in a tunnel which is part of an immense drainage—"

"For *real* ?"

"As you say, 'for real.'"

"This isn't a—a—virtuous reality, is it?"

Reggie didn't correct his word choice. "It is not."

" *How did we get here* ?"

"Reggie is still working on the problem."

If this was something Reggie couldn't figure out, it was big. *Very* big. A tingle ran down Axel's back.

Reggie didn't provide any details—how VOOM! managed to gain mobility and evade security notifications—because there *were* no details. Reggie had been preoccupied with Christine's theft of the DNA samples, which led to the confrontation, which led to the current standoff. Reggie's foremost responsibility was to the safety and well-being of the saurs. Axel and Tibor were not "safe" by any stretch, but the peril to Guinevere and Doris's egg was imminent.

It had been a long, long time since Reggie last faced so many simultaneous challenges. Not only had VOOM! evaded security, but its battery had been exhausted some while ago. And yet VOOM! was still traveling. From where was VOOM! receiving its power? Reggie could not curtail or shut down the vehicle until he found the power source. Apparently, VOOM! was equipped with a staggering assortment of modifications that (obviously) evaded Reggie's detection until they were put into use. VOOM! was a highly sophisticated piece of technology—not a Trojan Horse, but a herd of them.

Reggie was capable of inserting himself into most digital systems and examining their workings from within before arriving at an effective response. Eventually, he could work out all the mysteries of VOOM!.... Eventually.

The most immediate crisis for VOOM! was that it was reaching the limits of its material integrity—the tires were about to melt; next would be major elements of the metal carriage. The plastic exterior should have evaporated into a pink mist by now. It wouldn't be long, though. Its decomposition would solve the velocity problem.

"Hey, Reggie!"

"Reggie is ready."

"Should I be scared now?"

Reggie considered lying and dismissed the option. Yet Reggie had already lied when he said he was ready. Reggie was ready for nothing. How could Reggie assure—or not assure—Axel if Reggie himself was experiencing the algorithmic equivalents of fear and doubt?

Conventional software was not designed to cope with existential crises. But Reggie was *not* conventional software.

"Reggie requests a favor from Axel—a great favor."

"Sure, Reggie! I'd do anything for you!"

"Would Axel continue singing the song—*your* song—about Sinbad?"

"Sure!"

"If you feel fear, continue to sing—as loud as you can."

"Will do, Reggie! Full speed ahead!"

From under the seat: "No speed ahead!"

The pinpoint of light before them looked brighter, larger.

* * *

The crowd of saurs—every saur except those too traumatized by past experiences—followed Christine from the living room, to the porch, to Danner's yellow car. They stood with Bronte and Doris and they stared at Christine.

She demanded Danner hand over her purse and the e-key to his vehicle.

Before Danner returned it, he discreetly removed the scrambler Mr. Austin had given her and slipped it into his pocket.

"She'll screw up," Danner told Tom, who looked like he was ready to burst and make a lunge for her. "They always take one step too far."

"Always?"

"Almost."

"I don't like 'almost.'"

One of the saurs had brought Dr. Margaret her medical bag. She managed to get some gauze and bandages around Doc's head. "We're beyond 'one step,'" she said.

Danner took Doc's left forelimb and squeezed it gently.

Tom shook his head. "Maybe we'd better let her go. The safety of Guinevere and the egg are at stake."

"Not licked yet," said Danner.

"This isn't a *game* !"

"Who said it was? I'm talking about *play* , Tom. You need to learn to *play* ."

"This is serious!"

"Tom, nothing in life is more *dead* serious than play." He kept one hand in the pocket of his jacket. "Look, I screwed up, bringing her. Let me try to stop her. Trust me. Can you?"

Tom, who until then believed his job was to trust, shook his head. "I don't know."

"Not that I blame you." He turned to Dr. Margaret. "Can *you* trust me?"

Dr. Margaret, always definite, said, "Sorry."

He turned to Bronte and Doris.

"I want to," said Bronte.

Doris just stared at her egg, in Christine's grip.

"Doc?"

He still looked in pain but lucid, his eyes clear behind his heavy lids. He gave Danner piercing scrutiny...and nodded.

"Agnes?"

" *Hell no* !"

As soon as Agnes spoke, Kara replied, "I trust you!"

Doris looked to Kara and, apprehensively, nodded.

"Well, if you can't trust me, at least don't stop me."

Christine could hear and see all this. How much of it received her attention was difficult to gauge. She stared at the saurs, who stared back at her, and indicated to Danner with her right hand (the one holding the egg).

"Start the car!"

He sat down in the driver's seat and inserted his e-key.

It didn't start.

Christine scowled. "What's the matter?"

Danner made a face and shrugged.

"Start the damn car!"

"It's old," he said. "Sometimes the self-charging unit forgets to kick in." He stepped out and gestured to the driver's seat. "Try it yourself."

Christine stared at the car, then at the contents of her hands. It would be awkward to sit in the driver's seat without putting the egg and Guinevere down, or handing them off to someone—and that wouldn't do.

"It will take an hour to get a decent charge." Danner gestured to the car. "If you can wait."

In frustration, Christine brushed past him. She put the egg down on the passenger seat and kept hold of Guinevere—the eggling was small, but fast. The e-key was still in the starter slot, so she tried it again.

Danner managed to glance at the scrambler in his jacket pocket. He'd had time to set an EMP to interfere with the car's internal system but wasn't sure he'd set the correct range. Scramblers weren't very accurate, but at the right frequency they performed as advertised.

The saurs stared at the car, and at Christine. To her it felt tangible—all those eyes: sad, frightened, accusing eyes.

From the car: nothing. It wouldn't go.

She told herself the saurs weren't real, not "real" real. She picked up the egg and exited the car.

"Please!" Doris and Bronte pleaded. Other saurs joined in.

Toys aren't supposed to say, "Please!"—not like that. Not like the entreaties of worried, agonized mothers. Not that it mattered to Christine.

Would anyone, even a toy, cry out for *her* ? No way. No way in hell!

She headed for the perimeter. The lawn was not good terrain for high heels. She kicked them off. She couldn't carry them, not with Guinevere and the egg. She could always buy more shoes.

"Bad move," said Tom, following her slowly. They all did, three humans and a sea of saurs. "She'll hand them over to whoever's in the van."

"Patience." Danner removed the E-card from his car and glanced over at Christine's abandoned shoes. "She's running out of feet to shoot herself in."

"What do we do when she does?"

"Be ready to move very fast."

* * *

VOOM! continued through the tunnel accompanied by the sound of tires against concrete seams— *Diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it*—with the light ahead growing ever brighter, bigger.

"Axel."

"Yeah, Reggie?"

"Reggie has determined that nothing is wrong with the braking system itself. What you call the Click Thing is unable to complete its signal to the mechanism. However, if we can press a heavy object against the brake pedal, we should be able to decelerate—an object like that thick book upon which you are standing."

Axel stomped on the copy of *Zembla* with his right foot. "This thing, huh?"

"Exactly."

"You want me to push this on the brake?"

"If possible."

"I'll try. One thing first."

"What is it?"

"Which one is the brake?"

A brief hesitation. "Drop it on *both* pedals."

"Okay!"

Axel let go of the wheel, put down the Click Thing, and hopped off of *Zembla*. It was heavy, but he pushed as hard as he could with his forearms until it advanced far enough for him to insert his hind legs between the seat-back and the book.

Diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it—

"Reggie?"

"Yes, Axel?"

"Why's everybody on this alter vacation thing?"

Reggie, in the briefest terms, explained: what Christine had done with the samples; how she had injured Doc and damaged Rotomotoman; her holding Guinevere and the egg hostage.

Diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it—

"Doc is hurt! Rotomotoman! Guinevere! Egg! Gotta help them! We gotta go back!"

He pushed harder with his hind legs against the book, moving it along a few more centimeters.

"That is Reggie's intention."

"We gotta go back! We gotta go back!" He pressed his tail against the seat-back and pushed with all his might. *Zembla* tottered at the edge of the seat.

Diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it—

"GOTTA GO BACK! GOTTA GO BACK!"

Axel remembered another moment, one he repressed as often as he could. Many years before, before the house and everything: Lancelot! Axel, wounded, bleeding, barely escaped the trio of boys who had cut into him and Lancelot to show they weren't really "living"—just robots. Lancelot was back there—his *best* buddy. He had to go back but he *couldn't* go back. Had to save himself but couldn't leave his best buddy behind!

"No! No! *Lancelot ! No !*"

Reggie heard the words. He had heard them many times, as he heard everything that went on in the house. He heard them in almost every one of Axel's nightmares, his many, many nightmares.

"Axel!" said Reggie, using his sharpest enunciation.

"Lancelot! Lancelot!"

"Axel! Push the book on the pedals and *sing the song !*"

" *Lan—* "

" *Sing !*"

Axel sang. He pushed and sang.

"Sinnn-baaad is a spaaaaace—!"

The book slipped away from him. Gravity did its job.

Diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it-diddle-it—

Just before the book fell, Axel looked down and saw Tibor peeking out from under the seat.

"Tibor! *Look out!* "

Tibor ducked back.

The book, spine first, hit the pedals. With the impact, the pages flew open and fluttered, releasing a tiny square—no bigger than an old-fashioned postage stamp. It was as thin as a sheet of onionskin but made of something more durable and silicon-based, as far as Reggie could tell. It was printed with complex circuitry that Reggie couldn't examine before it fluttered off behind VOOM! and into the tunnel. Reggie surmised it was a sort of wireless power relay. The further the distance between the relay and the car, the weaker the connection became. VOOM! was decelerating, finally.

Dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit-dit—

Reggie wished he had the opportunity to examine the power source more closely, since it was technology of a sort he had never seen before, but under the circumstances he was willing to let it go.

Axel looked to his right, and there was Tibor.

"How did you get up here?"

Tibor, startled but stoical, said only, "Tibor has many secrets."

"Hey, Reggie—did it work?"

"It—something—did. The vehicle is slowing down."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"The situation could be worse."

With *Zembla* atop the pedals, Axel could no longer see through the windshield. But it was getting brighter.

Much brighter.

And doing so very quickly.

* * *

The late-autumn afternoon light was fading, and the saurs who had followed Christine out to the edge of the property felt the chill in the air as well as a growing fear of the coming dark. Some of them had not been such a distance from the house in years and glanced back warily to see how far out they had gone. The lights had come on. The house looked warm and comforting, silhouetted by the setting sun. They wanted to go back but they couldn't leave Bronte and Doris.

Of the humans, it was perhaps not surprising that Tom glanced back in much the same way.

Christine stood at the very perimeter of the property. "Shut it down," she demanded.

Tom hesitated.

Christine held up the egg and Guinevere. "Shut it down."

He spoke to Reggie through his phone. "Take down the security net, please."

"One moment, Tom. Reggie is experiencing a brief delay due to an overload in VOOM!"

Tom twitched at that last word.

"Security net is down." Reggie almost sighed the words.

Reverse beepers sounded from the van in the woods as it backed up behind Christine.

Danner stood about a meter away from her, hands open and empty. "If you give them to those guys, you lose everything."

She held out the egg and Guinevere—reminding him who had the top cards. She looked brash, but it could have been an act.

Danner reached toward her, almost touching her fingers.

"I'll give you something they can't take away."

She stared at him with skepticism.

"Everything I know."

No change in her expression.

"Why do you think they've kept me all these years?"

Her expression shifted to one of contempt.

She's afraid, Danner thought. "What did Zoey tell you about me? Or Austin? Did they call me an 'asset'?"

She still held back, but listened.

"Put two and two together, Christine. Like a couple of outer-membrane proteins."

She looked at him as if he had just thrown a wrench at her.

"Binary outer-membrane proteins, introduced at strategic points. They open the sequence to billions of new variations."

Two men approached from the van: one in a dark, knitted watch cap; the other had a shaved head. They held their arms outward, as if feeling for the security net. They would have looked more imposing were they not so thin and not eyeing the house so cautiously, as if expecting something to shoot out from there—something fast and fiery.

Danner nodded toward the approaching men. "They'll take them from you and claim the credit. They'll rip you off."

She raised her shoulder to keep her purse strap from slipping down. "You won't tell me anything."

He pointed at the two from the van. "Like you'll get something from *them*."

Just then, she looked like she hated him—because she did; she hated him because he was right—and like she had suddenly become aware of what she was doing.

He held out his hands, hoping she would pass him the egg and Guinevere. "Kid, you got the cards but the pot's empty."

The men from the van flanked Danner, but on the other side of the property line.

"We'll take those," the one with the shaved head said to Christine. "Come on. We'll drive you back to town."

Danner reached into his pocket for the scrambler, hoping to pull off the same trick with the van as with his car.

"No," she told the two men. "The samples are in my purse." She held the egg and Guinevere out to Danner. "Take them."

The man in the watch cap slapped his hand on her shoulder and pulled her back. "That stuff's worth more. A *lot* more."

"Fuck off!" She jerked herself out from his hold but she was handicapped by the treasures she held in her hands.

Danner lunged forward, but the man in the watch cap pulled a Taser from his pea coat. The weapon was no more than a box with a pistol grip. A squirt gun might look more dangerous, but wouldn't be.

He pointed the Taser at Danner, clearly ready to use it.

Danner heard something—as he had before he arrived at the house. This time it wasn't a mere wistful memory. It was a *real* sound in the *real* atmosphere, above—and to the north.

It was *singing*, far away and off-key...getting louder, if not better.

"Sinnnn-bad! Sinnnn-bad! "

As he looked around, he could tell that this time everybody else could hear it as well.

* * *

"Hey, Tibor! We're *in the air* !"

VOOM! fired out of the tunnel like a bullet from a gun. Though losing velocity, it would remain aloft for about a kilometer, granted its current ascending angle.

"Yeah!" shouted Axel. "We're going *up* !"

In a lower voice, beside him: "No! *Down*! "

And then the car doors reshaped themselves into wings, at an aerodynamically beneficial orientation: flaps up.

Wings.

This, too, appeared to be a hidden modification to the car's specifications that took Reggie completely by surprise.

Glider technology? Yes. UAV technology? Yes. Even stealth technology—Reggie understood them all. But this was VOOM! technology.

He traced the distance and direction of VOOM! and determined it would come down in the forest that surrounded the house, as if this had been the plan all along.

Reggie could ponder that later.

Right now, he had to calculate what would happen when the pink missile "landed."

An unmanned aerial vehicle (though this vehicle was carrying two very living passengers) is often equipped with helicopter propellers and landing gear. Reggie concluded, after brief review, that VOOM! had neither. Either VOOM! was a poorly designed UAV, or it was modified for another purpose. In what way could he ensure the safety of VOOM!'s two passengers?

No way.

"Hey! Tibor! We're *in the air* ! We're going to *space* !"

"No! To *Earth* !" Tibor muttered. "Too quickly. Too *soon* !"

To be flying—or, more correctly, gliding—and not able to see anything was more frustration than Axel could bear. He hopped onto the steering wheel and peered up past the dashboard through the windshield. With his weight, the wheel turned to the right. The accidental banking to the west kept the car aloft a little longer.

"Tibor! Look! I can see *trees* ! They look like *moss* ! And the sun is going *down* !"

"So are we."

"Hey, Reggie!"

"Reggie is ready."

"How do we land?"

A pause.

" *Reggie* ?"

"Axel should keep singing the song."

And so he did. But Axel knew that wasn't a good answer, that maybe Reggie didn't know how to land the VOOM! And if Reggie didn't know (he knew *everything*), it was because there *was* no way to land.

That was bad.

"Sinnnn-bad! Sinnnn-bad!"

Axel hopped back onto the front seat and examined his Click Thing. At one point or another, he had pushed every button on its face; some he had pushed many times, but never the one Ross had told him was "NO!" The button he should never, *ever* push!

"Sinnnn-bad! Sinnnn-bad!"

The sky shifted from bright blue to indigo and the first planets were visible, along with a few bright stars—going from Earth Sky to Space Sky. And where was the Moon? He wanted to see all the stars, up close, like he wanted to see the city, and maybe he would someday.

But right now he wanted to be back home. He wanted to be with his friends, and he wanted to help because Doc was hurt and someone was trying to take away Guinevere and Doris's egg. He couldn't leave them behind the way he'd left Lancelot behind. Lancelot was dead and Diogenes was dead and he didn't want to leave them behind. He was alive and that shouldn't be—but he had to help his friends—

He looked at the "NO!" button.

No no no! Ross said *never* ! Axel was going to follow directions for once and listen— *listen* —when someone said "No!" He was going to listen! He would never never never...

Except in an emergency.

He heard a voice—Geraldine's—coming from right behind him, almost straight into his ear.

In that still, soft Geraldine voice, she said, " *Press the button.* "

So he did.

He heard a *POW!*—like a gunshot—as bolts fired out of their moorings, releasing the front seat, which sprang upward like a trained porpoise leaping for a fish.

Four more bolts came out with a *KA-POW!* for each bolt as the parachute engaged.

A parachute .

Axel and Tibor left the *VOOM!* below them as it sank into the darkening sea of trees.

"Sinnnn-bad! Sinnnn-bad! "

The parachute caught a slight crosswind—Tibor almost floated off in the jostling, but Axel grabbed him and held on tight. Tibor was Tibor, but he was also a little guy, and it was the duty of the big guys to look after the little ones, no matter how many bad, dysfunctional universes they might have created.

And Axel, in that moment, thought of himself as a big guy.

Tibor's green hat had come loose. Axel pressed it down until it was back securely on Tibor's head.

"Tibor—and Tiboria—thanks you!"

"Sinnnn-bad! Sinnnn-bad!"

It was a mild day, and after a few bumpy moments, the parachute brought them down gently into a clearing not far from where their friends were gathered at the edge of the woods.

Simultaneously, VOOM! progressed toward its inevitable target.

* * *

NO ONE, TO THIS DAY, knows where the slingshot came from, but Ross had it. He may have hidden it on the grounds, in reserve. Before the man in the watch cap could pull the trigger on the Taser, Ross sent a red checker squarely at his forehead with exceptional accuracy. It even made a sound like a xylophone mallet striking a wooden box. The man wailed and pressed his hand to where the checker made impact, but he kept the Taser aimed at Danner.

A wild scattering of checkers flew at him. Many, maybe most, were not aimed well, not as well as Ross's shot, but there were enough of them—red and black—to drive the two men back toward the van. The checkers came, no doubt, from the same source as the slingshot. Ross had distributed them moments before, choosing those saurs most likely to use their tails and forelimbs with accuracy, though he made sure even the little ones received a few—they needed to feel they, too, had helped.

"Foo!" Ross led the saurs, who chanted with him as they fired their ammo. "Foo! Bad, *bad* guys! *Foo!* "

Ross made Christine his next target, perhaps hoping to stun her so that she would drop her hostages.

The checker hit her on the side of the head, but it hardly fazed her. She stared northward, mouth and eyes wide open, at something fast approaching—something pink. Her hands opened as wide as her eyes, letting slip the gray, speckled egg and the salmon-colored sauropod.

"Tom!" Danner shouted.

Tom dove for the egg and caught it before it hit the ground. Danner, in like manner, slid over the leaf-strewn floor of the forest just in time to intercept Guinevere before she could make impact against that same hard

surface. The two looked like a couple of old-fashioned baseball players, rising and holding aloft their prizes to the relief of the gathered saurs...until Tom and Danner caught sight of that pink, winged projectile, fast approaching, reflecting the last light of dusk.

"Get back!" Danner waved his free arm about to everyone in range. " *Get back!* "

"Down!" Tom ran to Dr. Margaret. "No time to run! Get down! Flat! Hit the ground!"

"Saurians!" Agnes, tail raised, plates lying flat, stood over Leslie. "Protect yourselves!"

Ross tucked his head forward so he could cover his ears with his forepaws. "Incoming!" he shouted.

Christine stood there, frozen, until Danner, still carefully holding Guinevere, tackled her.

The air roared above him. Through some aerodynamic quirk or the workings of his own imagination, a screeching whistle traced its trajectory. He could see the van and the two men running for it, and the pink car shooting from overhead.

Danner wouldn't need the scrambler after all.

That a pink plastic car could so thoroughly crumple the exterior of a large metal van was not so incredible when you remember the simple efficiency of velocity combined with mass.

Where the flames came from would be hard to construe without an inventory of the van's contents. There might have been spying equipment within, or a stock of combustible fuel. It didn't matter. The van went up in a bright ball of flame, throwing pieces of itself in every direction.

The noise of the explosion was unmistakable:

"VOOM!"

* * *

The wreckage burned for an hour. The van's occupants were last seen fleeing through the woods, their condition and destination unknown.

Axel and Tibor left the parachuted car seat behind and raced toward the smoke and flames.

The first person they saw was Danner, dusting himself off, bending down to help the other human, Christine, who looked shaken and dazed. Then they saw Tom, holding his lower back with one hand, the other pressing his forehead.

Next to him stood Doris, inspecting her egg, which appeared to be safe and sound. Bronte and Guinevere stood beside her.

Axel ran up to them. "Is everybody okay? Where's Doc?"

"He's bruised and his jaw's dislocated," Dr. Margaret said, "but he'll be all right."

Cradled in her arms, Doc appeared in no hurry to recover.

"Are *you* okay?" Tom knelt and put his hand gently on Axel's head. "What happened to *you* ?"

Tibor announced with assurance, "Tibor was beset by traitorous scoundrels. Through bravery and cunning, he waylaid his enemies and returned in time to save the day."

"We were going *real fast* !" was all Axel added.

Then he saw the wreckage.

"My VOOM!" he said softly.

" *Tibor's* VOOM!"

"It's... *gone* !" He stared at the flames.

"Good thing, too." Agnes watched the wreckage carefully, as if she expected the van and the VOOM! to reassemble. "You see? Nothing good ever came from anything *pink* !"

"You get *better* car!" Ross patted Axel on the back. " *Bigger* car—like humans drive. You own da road *again* !"

"Not for a while, I hope," said Tom.

The saurs were cold, and night filled in where the daylight retreated. They slowly made their way back to their home.

The humans, all but Christine, followed them in.

"What are you going to do?" Tom asked Danner.

"What are *you* going to do?"

Tom looked at the sky overhead. "I think Susan Leahy at the Foundation can be persuaded not to prosecute."

" *If* she hands over the samples," Dr. Margaret added. "And *if* she agrees *never* to return. We can't forgive her, but prosecuting the little idiot won't make things better."

"Agreed." Danner approached Christine, his hand out. "Hey."

Christine opened her purse and passed him the samples. Danner took the purse and checked through its contents to make sure nothing else was hidden within. "Reggie would detect them anyway." He handed the purse back, then gave her his e-key.

"The car won't start," she said.

"It will now." He returned her scrambler.

She looked around, her face a distortion of fury, exasperation, and exhaustion. "I—I don't know what just happened. I don't know what I've just *seen* !"

He stared at the smoldering wreckage. "What you've seen is this: the world's not the place you thought. Not the place you *didn't* think. It's changing. And you can't do a thing about it."

She looked no less confused for the answer—no less angry.

"Who *are* you? *What* are you?"

For a moment, he thought of saying "Joe Hill," but he wasn't Joe Hill. Not a bit. "Drop the car off at my apartment. The parking guys will know what to do. You can take a cab from there. I'll reimburse you when I see you at work."

"How will you get home?"

"I'll take another cab."

"That'll cost a fortune. It'll take forever."

"I'm in no hurry."

Before she got into the car, she asked, "What you said about outer-membrane proteins—is that for real?"

Danner shrugged. "Who listens to a nobody?"

She slammed the car door—hard—and took off.

Danner watched his car head down the driveway.

Above the trees, news drones hovered over the wreckage. Local authorities stopped by and asked questions, but there wasn't much to say. Yes, they saw something strike the van. No, they didn't know what the van was doing out there. No, they didn't know what struck the van. It was pink.

Danner stayed for dinner. He sat with Tom and Dr. Margaret, surrounded by saurs sitting at their own tiny tables.

Afterward, Dr. Margaret asked, "What would you have done if you hadn't become a prisoner of Toyco?"

"Me? No one cares about that."

"I do."

As he thought over an answer, the Five Wise Buddhasaurs arrived, holding their instruments, waiting.

"I think," he told her, "I would have been a drummer."

Danner followed the Buddhasaurs back to their couch in the former dining room.

The Buddhasaurs played and Danner kept the beat, showing them some new tempos along the way.

Dit-diddit Bomp! Dit-diddit Bomp!

And the saurs listened and kept the beat with them, tails and limbs and voices all together.

No one sat before the living room video screen that night.

Everyone attended except Geraldine. She remained in her lab, where the lights kept flashing and from which the strange noises kept emanating. She peeked out once, smiling that unsettling, squinky smile.

When the evening's music died down and the saurs readied themselves for the sleep room—and the cab had still not arrived—Danner stepped out on the porch to wait. It was a chilly night, but the weather didn't appear to bother him.

Only Axel went along and sat down with him on the edge of the porch. They stared for a while at the last embers of VOOM! in the woods, then Axel looked up at the night sky.

"Do you know about *frogs* ?"

"A little," said Danner.

"Do you know if frogs come from space?"

"Maybe."

"Space is *big* !"

Danner nodded. "Big as anything. Big as *everything* ."

" *Yeah* !"

Axel looked up at the old man with his wild hair and wiry beard, his worn features, his funny-looking eyeglass things. To Axel, he was someone who had sailed the world—worlds, even.

He could have been any old man, any human—so many old humans these days; so many young ones growing old already. He could have been any of them. He wasn't. He put the Bomp, whatever that meant.

Axel was smarter now. Much smarter. He had learned all sorts of things today. And what he learned, he *knew* .

He knew who Danner was.

He was Sinbad.

— *For Bob "The Green Knight" Carlson, and David G. Hartwell*

Driverless

By Robert Grossbach | 9244 words

When we told Robert Grossbach that his newest story was scheduled for an upcoming issue, he was relieved. "I've been reading all sorts of stories in both the regular and technical press about how quickly driverless cars are coming," he wrote. "I'd begun to worry that my story would no longer be fiction before publication."

But here in the F&SF offices, we weren't worried. While we've seen a lot of stories about driverless cars—both fiction and non-fiction—we haven't seen anything quite like this one.

THEY'VE BEGUN CALLING IT the Great Setback now, something redolent of those two other prolonged economic catastrophes, the Great Depression and the Great Recession. If one can forgive the hubris, I believe I'm considered by most cognoscenti to be one of the primary enabling agents, someone akin to a major stockbroker in 1929, or a mortgage derivatives dealer in 2009. In short, someone who finally got what he deserved. And I suppose it's something I can't really quibble with.

I do remember pretty well the night it started. The evening, for me, had begun at one of those fancy, overpriced, mediocre-food, fawning-service Lower Manhattan restaurants near One World Trade Center. Erica had picked it out, of course, and she'd sensed my disdain.

"I know, I know, you could have found a better one."

"Well...yes, I believe so. At least a less pretentious one."

"Always a competition, Jacob. No item too small."

"Hey, that's what life is. Competition is how we evolved. It's capitalism, it's—" I stopped myself. I may be a dick, but I'm a dick with some self-awareness. Some. "And I take it too far. I know that, I know that."

"Okay, next time, you get to choose the place. I suppose it'll be a White Castle, or equivalent...which is fine."

"So there'll be a next time...."

She smiled, that dimple-chinned, sparkly-eyed perfect smile I'd fallen in love with twenty years earlier. "That, my friend, is up to you."

Almost, I reached out to touch her hand...but it was not something one did with a wife you'd been separated from for the last four months. I closed my eyes, then opened them to meet her gaze. "I...miss you." And at that instant, I felt terribly, overwhelmingly sorry for her, a still-attractive, intelligent, basically tolerant woman who'd had the misfortune to marry me. She'd passed her child-bearing years now with no offspring, and she, like I, would never throw her genes into the next generation.

"I miss you, too," she said, and my heart just about exploded out the walls of my chest, "but, you know, you know..." She sighed. "There needs to be..."

I did know. There needed to be a change. And I wanted very much to be capable of that, but didn't know if I was.

She stood up. "I gotta go," she said. "I gotta finish my new lesson plan tonight. Wanna share a car?"

I was living in a small apartment in Battery Park City. "No, no, that's okay, I need—"

"You have to head back to the office, right?" She didn't even wait for the sheepish expression on my face to fully form. "It's okay, Jacob." She shook her head. "It's fine."

Five minutes later, we were at the front of the restaurant.

"Need transportation, folks?" the *maître d'* asked.

I held up my cell phone. "Thanks, we're good." We stepped outside into the frigid late-November air.

I used my app to call up a car, input our home address in Brooklyn Heights—well, Erica's home address, no longer mine...and waited.

To my considerable (and unhappy) surprise, the competition arrived first. A sky-blue JiffyRide sedan. The door popped open. "Welcome, sir or madam, may I verify your destination?" The voice was masculine, with a slight British accent. Antiquated or just careless software, didn't recognize customer gender even though it had (or should have had) all the information.

"Okay, Jacob," Erica said. "Good seeing you." She gave me a light peck on the cheek, then climbed into the vehicle.

"Good seeing you, too," I said lamely. The phrase kept reverberating in my head. The distance of it from my wife. My *wife*. Good seeing you, good seeing you. Good seeing you, woman with the silky brown hair, woman with the voluptuous breasts, slim thighs, throaty laugh, woman who picked out all

my clothes, made me the low-class foods I loved, who'd married me when I was nothing, stayed with me through all the struggles on the way up, while I buried myself at work. Good seeing you. I felt suddenly sickened, bloodless, chilled to my core.

I called a car for myself. It was close to two minutes before yet another competitor arrived, this time an Uber. Just...irritating. Really disturbing. I shook my head and began walking slowly toward it when suddenly I heard the loud squealing noise of tires scraping on asphalt. A vehicle with a red-lit QuikTrip sign screamed around the corner and pulled up directly in front of the Uber, then backed to within an inch of its front bumper. The Uber's door was already open. "Sir," came the Uber's voice, "are you ready to proceed?"

By law, New York City ordinance, one was obligated to use the first vehicle that arrived, or pay for it if you didn't. The City Council's way of equalizing competition and dissuading people from calling five different car companies.

I was about to respond when a second QuikTrip car came squealing around the corner and smoothly rolled to the curb within an inch of the Uber's rear bumper.

I was, frankly, dumbfounded. I'd been around driverless cars—DCs as they're now called—for a large portion of my adult life, but had never quite seen this exact situation. I decided to play along. "Yes," I said to the Uber, entering the vehicle. "You have my destination."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay...let's go."

There was a nearly fifteen-second delay, then: "Sir, I'm afraid the vehicles in front and to the rear of me prevent my departure at this time."

"Really.... Well, how long will it be?"

"I can't say, sir. It's a circumstance beyond my control. The closest analog I can find is being rendered immobile in a traffic jam."

"Well, I'm going to have to leave. You can't expect me to be here all night."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir, but I will need to charge you for the ride. I've already broadcast that I am the first respondent to your call."

"But you haven't given me a ride, nor are you able to. We haven't even started out. Surely you can't charge me for a service you're unable to provide." Okay, I was playing with it. It was a machine, and I (of all people)

knew full well its intellectual limitations, but nevertheless...I was playing with it.

Another fifteen-second pause. "Sir, I will place the charge into an 'Error' category, and Uber will contact you at a later date to resolve the issue."

"That's fine," I said, hoisting myself out of the car. Not bad, I thought. Pretty well handled. A new situation, no clear resolution, and the programming just flipped it into a "TBD" category. Okay...but bottom line, they'd lost the business to a competitor. I strode to the lead QuikTrip DC, slid into the front seat, and closed the door behind me.

"Mr. Rittenberg," said the vehicle, "a great pleasure, sir." The voice was soft and female. "Seat belt comfortable, sir?"

"Fine," I answered.

"Temperature satisfactory?"

"Yes. Good."

"Then here we go." The car rolled quickly away from the curb. The electric motors barely made a noise.

"So, first, a JiffyRide beats you here by a minute forty-three seconds," I said. "And then an Uber beats you by almost another minute. And then you and the other QuikTrip DC pull that hemming-in maneuver. I mean, what exactly is going on?"

"Sir, both I and the other QT vehicle were delayed for a short time while we were receiving the new software download. Immediately afterward, as always, we needed to check and update the traffic patterns, signal lights, local area vehicle density function, other-caller function—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute...do you give out this information to anyone who asks?"

"No, sir."

"Then you know who I am..."

"Of course, sir."

"Who? Tell me." Never hurt to check. Or, as the old union guys used to say, never trust a machine.

"You are...Father."

I couldn't help myself, I laughed out loud. No excuses, it was a horrible, infantile conceit, a secret (well, nearly so), purely egotistical pleasure I'd had Jeff Liang, my chief software engineer, program into the new upgrade a month ago. A special founder-and-CEO perk. I'm sure Liang thought I was an asshole, and he was probably correct, but this was *my* company, and the DCs

were my foster children, and if it made me laugh to have them call me "Father," then fuck everyone else, that's the way it would be. I had no kids of my own, so these little scooting electronic toys were the nearest thing. Call it a pathology if you want, or sign of a fast-approaching nervous breakdown. Either way, I know, I know...pathetic.

We were passing Canal Street by this time. "Were you aware that the other car was called to Alberto's?"

"I was, Father. There were, in fact, two other DCs that were responding. The second was a Topper."

"And did you use any countermeasures on either of them?" Once again, my own compulsive need. DECM, Domestic Electronic Countermeasures (as it was known in the trade) was one of my specialties, a capability I'd personally introduced to the world of driverless pickups. Quite illegal, of course, but all the companies did it now.

"Yes, sir, although I can't be sure of their efficacy since I believe they were also using DECM on me."

"Mmmm." I wasn't surprised. It was exactly like the defense industry from whence I'd come. One side used electronics, the other electronic countermeasures, the first counter-countermeasures, and so on, ad infinitum. DECM had been the logical step to gain a competitive advantage. The technology was a bit different—interfering, in city canyons, with the GPS signals of your competitors only while not affecting the devices of average citizens, police and fire vehicles, and ambulances. Making the competition's wireless tire-inflation sensors signal nonexistent defects. Spoofing their LIDARs to create phantom pedestrians, walls, or other vehicles that caused them to slow or stop. In short, nasty little tricks that required only some inexpensive hardware and software, sometimes so simple and cheap you could blame it on a handheld device used by a hacker. The goal, of course, was always the same: disrupt your opponent's ability to carry out his mission. "How do you know?"

"I lost my GPS for 41.32 seconds, sir, on the way to the call. Of course, I can't be certain it was because of DECM."

"I see. Okay—" I glanced up at the overhead panel "—DC 2394, good report. Excellent. Carry on." Of course, as always, I felt foolish. I knew full well there was no need to compliment a machine, but our conversational interactions and norms are developed with humans. And so, call it habit, or

just mindless politeness, I always treated anything that talked to me with courtesy.

"Thank you, Father," it said.

It was 8:45 when I got to the Chrysler Building. As usual, the pickets were still parading outside on 42nd Street, holding up their cardboard signs, hunched inside their coats against the cold. Ex-taxi drivers, truckers, Uber, Lyft, and Topper drivers, pizza and other take-out deliverers—in short, anyone who ever operated a vehicle for money and had been put out of a job by driverless cars. They eyed me sullenly as I crossed their picket line and entered the building.

"Good evening, sir," said the guard at the lobby desk as I approached.

"Bruce," I said, indicating the picketers, "I'd like to order them pizzas. Can you do that for me?" I reached into my pocket, handed him two hundred-dollar bills. "And maybe coffee, too. Something hot. You think this is enough?"

"It's plenty, Mr. R. No problem."

"Good. Just keep any change left over." I hesitated. "And if anyone asks, don't tell 'em it's from me, they probably won't take it. Just say it's from, I donno, one of the other companies." The Chrysler Building had lots of tenants. I headed for the elevator.

Erica's father had been an Uber driver; before that, an out-of-work machinist. It was tough, what was happening to those people, blue-collar types displaced and left behind in society's mad rush to automation. And I was one of the facilitators, no question. Both Erica and her father had never brought up the subject, never uttered a word to me about it, but I knew the resentment was there. How could it not be? It was shortly after her father died last year that things had begun to go bad between us, and I was fairly sure my hyper-competitive nature and workaholism were not the only causes.

QuikTrip occupied three stories; my office was on the seventy-fourth. The night shift was on the other two floors, of course, but the executive level was almost empty, as one might expect at nine o'clock on a weekday night. After all, not many maniacs stayed that late...apart from Liang, the only other one I knew whose life was as empty as my own (at least he was a bachelor), and whose work-compulsion was equally strong. I strode past his still-lit office and then a half-dozen vacant ones until I reached my own.

"Good evening, sir," my office assistant said, its voice issuing from the wall screen opposite my desk. "Is there anything you'd like? Can I heat up

some coffee for you? Would you like to see your vidmail or email messages?"

"No, I don't think so, Joan." I'd named it after my college English teacher. "I think I'm just—Actually, I'm not sure what I'm going to do."

I ended up looking at techie stuff, perusing Web material about the new platforms—that's how the techies refer to DCs nowadays, assigning them the status of mere mobile support structures for the specialized hardware and software that made them capable of operation without human drivers. It was an exact analog to half-century-old defense industry jargon: The offensive avionics, defensive avionics, navigation instruments, communications gear, and weaponry were the important parts of the plane, the fuselage, wings, and engines almost incidental. All this was good for me, of course, since it was my company and those like it that were perceived as supplying the real value in cars—and yet, somehow, "You are the wind beneath my platform" just didn't have much of a ring to it.

Anyway, when I got tired of reading about all the new cheap-shit structural composites and better-than-ever carbon-nanotube-based batteries, I turned—or tried to turn—to culture. For me, that meant studying about operas, listening to some of them, or some *parts* of them, and then reading about what I was hearing and supposed to like. The problem was (and is) I'm a Philistine. I've tried, really tried, but I just am not moved, interested, or affected by most art, classical music, ballets, literary fiction...and opera. I wish it were different. I wish I were more like Liang, who was not only a techie, but who appreciated the finer aspects of culture. I wish that Erica had not outgrown me in those respects, yet another reason why we'd drifted apart.

"Maybe I'll take a quick nap," I said to Joan after ten minutes of Puccini.

"Very good, sir. I have the room temperature just as you like it, and one of the office 'bots has your dental floss, toothpaste, and skin creams ready on the bathroom counter if you'd care for a shower."

"Good. Thank you." See, as I said: conversational norms. And yes, big-shots like me had their own private bathrooms.

Ten minutes later, I was fast asleep on my temperature-optimized couch.

* * *

THE WAKE-UP CALL came at one A.M., and Joan's soft voice didn't mitigate the jarring breakthrough into my REM sleep.

"Sir, I'm terribly sorry to wake you, I really am, but I was ordered to do so by the caller and, in my best judgment after thoroughly checking his identification, the individual appeared to have the requisite authority."

My quick nap had turned into a four-hour coma, and I was not pleased. I was extremely protective of my sleep, felt I needed every second of it, guarded it ferociously (yes, perhaps somewhat irrationally), and generally was very, very pissed off when someone stole even a few minutes of it. It had happened before, almost invariably with one of my foreign VPs and some business situation he/she felt was an ultra-emergency and that usually turned out to be something that could have well been delayed till morning. QuikTrip was an international enterprise and, in their humble estimation, the rest of the world couldn't wait for U.S. East Coast Standard Time to be reasonable.

"Put him on speaker," I told Joan. "No video, of course."

"Yes?" I said curtly to the blank wall screen.

"Dr. Rittenberg?"

"Yes." It wasn't someone who knew me. I did have a Ph.D. in electrical engineering, but no one who knew me ever called me "Doctor."

"This is General Steven Farnsworth of the Department of Homeland Security. I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour, really am very sorry, but we have a situation here that—"

"Where's 'here'?"

"Oh. Well, I don't want to say over the phone, but it's not terribly far and —"

"Wait, wait—why are you calling *me*?"

"The situation involves an area of your particular expertise. You and your company's. It's an emergency, Dr. Rittenberg, a very big one. I wouldn't be contacting you if it weren't, and we need your presence. I'm sending a car for you, be there in about twenty minutes. Is that okay? I know it's not much time, but as I said...."

I rolled my eyes, but of course, he couldn't see. "I'll be in the lobby. It's the Chrysler Building. It's on—"

"We know where you are," he said, only the teensiest note of sarcasm discernible in his voice.

I threw on a pair of jeans and a polo shirt, peed, ran a brush through what was left of my hair, and staggered out of my office toward the elevator. I noticed Liang's office was dark. I nodded to Bruce when I got to the lobby. Outside, the picketers had gone home for the evening. True to Farnsworth's word, ten minutes later, a car pulled up in front of the entrance. The surprising—actually, astonishing—thing was that it had a real human driver.

You need to understand: By the late twenties, virtually no one who lived in a big city drove their own car. It simply didn't pay. When you considered the insurance savings, the gas or electricity savings, the safety advantages, the not-having-to-look-for-parking or pay for it or have a building with a garage, the things you could do on the way to anywhere if you didn't have to drive, the *stress* savings...I mean, why would anyone bother to actually *own* a vehicle?

Well, of course, some people did. Some people always do anything. People who wanted their independence, who were annoyed at the way the machines drove, or afraid of them, people wanting to tailgate or go very slowly or cut into lanes—but their numbers were small, I mean, like, two percent small, the lunatic fringe...and they tended to be self-limiting.

"Are you capable of speech?" I asked the driver after ten minutes of silence. We were heading downtown, and he'd said, "Hey," as a first-sight acknowledgment of my presence, opened the door for me, and then...nothing further. It was a bit strange: The DCs all have their front seats facing the rear—I've never really been sure exactly why; maybe, when they first were being introduced, they just wanted to emphasize how different they were from ordinary vehicles, or maybe it was a safety thing—but now the car I was in had them facing front.

"I am," the driver said.

"And can you tell me your name?"

"You can call me Mike."

I guessed then that Mike's conversation would be slightly less scintillating than that of QuikTrip vehicle #2394. "And can you tell me where we're headed, Mike?"

"Sorry," Mike said.

So much for rational behavior. Since they hadn't blindfolded or hooded me, I'd be finding out soon anyway. I guess he had his instructions.

Farnsworth hadn't been kidding when he said his relative location was not "terribly far." It was literally only fourteen blocks before we pulled into

the alleyway of a nondescript thirty-story building on East 51st street, and thence down a long ramp into a small garage. (Since the DC era began in earnest, nobody had large garages anymore—there simply was no need.) Mike opened my door, I got out, and he ushered me toward an elevator. To my slight surprise, he pressed the "down" button.

It seemed like we must've dropped at least five floors. When we egressed, it was into a brightly lit, empty corridor. Twenty yards down, we entered a small anteroom: two sofas, coatrack, vinyl-tiled floor, artificial plant in one corner. Mike strode to a door at one end and opened it a crack. "He's here," I heard him say softly. The door closed. Mike motioned me to have a seat. "He'll be right out," he said. And disappeared out the door we came in before I could thank him for his sparkling repartee.

A moment later, a tall, bony-faced, shaven-headed man in rolled-up sleeves and Marine fatigues emerged from the inner sanctum. "Steve Farnsworth," he said, extending a hand. "Thanks so much for coming, really appreciate it."

"Didn't exactly sound like I had a lot of options," I said.

"Well, you could've just said no and sat back while the world ended." He grinned.

Live every day as if it were your last, I thought.

He sat down next to me on the couch. "Before I tell you what's going on, I need to ask you a few questions. Your DCs, they communicate wirelessly in the 2496 to 2690 MHz band, are all networked, and all have individual AIs that track customer calls, streetlight ON-OFF periods, and both your vehicles' positions and those of your competitors, at least the ones you're aware of."

I nodded and (one of my too-numerous-to-mention-except-by-my-first-wife failings) couldn't resist a bit of bragging. "Plus they keep track of their own fuel or battery charges, tire conditions, weather conditions, general traffic, street closings and street fairs, accidents, parades, potholes, work by Con Edison, visits by foreign dignitaries—anything that might affect times from one pickup to the next."

"And they accomplish all this by..."

"Well, they use the internet, of course—newsfeeds, general information—the cloud, plus, as you already said, reports by other cars. I mean, we keep track of the basic inputs and outputs—calls and car locations, that sort of stuff—but it's really a self-organizing network. Now what's going on?"

He held up a palm. "Just bear with me one more minute." He pursed his lips. "I'm not really a techie and I'm just trying to get my mind around all this stuff. So the cars, they communicate with each other, they go out on the web, and they obviously have substantial speech-recognition capability."

"Well, yes, just like Home Assistants or Personal Assistants. I mean, they can conduct a conversation with customers—I wouldn't necessarily say it's a sparkling one—but on the other hand, neither is that of many humans."

He must've sensed my impatience.

"Almost there, almost there...Tell me about DECM. Do you use it...your cars?"

I widened my eyes theatrically. "DECM is illegal, General. QuikTrip is a law-abiding company."

He grinned, stood up, and motioned me to do the same. "Of course it is, Dr. Rittenberg. Thank you." He extended a palm toward the inner door. "I think we're ready to go inside."

The room was huge, maybe fifty feet square, dimly lit, but with at least two-dozen large wall monitors and, at a guess, twenty operators seated at four curved rows of computers. Think Mission Control at Johnson Space Center. I followed Farnsworth to a raised area at the center of the curves. There, three more operatives sat staring at brightly lit screens.

"This was mainly intended for security emergencies," he said. "Terrorist attacks, power outages, storms, floods, that type of thing." He wagged his head. "But tonight...starting about midnight, we have something else entirely, something we've never seen before. Anywhere. Tonight, it seems that a large number of driverless vehicles in the city have been colliding with other driverless vehicles."

"What? That's—How many?"

He leaned over a woman at one of the screens, whispered something, listened while she whispered something back. "Eight hundred forty-three, so far. And the number keeps increasing."

"Jesus, I—"

"And even odder, Dr. Rittenberg, is that in every case we've had time to investigate, the collision has been precipitated by a QuikTrip car."

I sensed the blood beginning to drain out of my head. I had difficulty forming a thought.

"Unfortunately, it gets worse."

I felt myself swaying slightly. "I...I don't see how it can."

"A certain subset of driverless customers has not been taken to their requested destinations, but instead have been driven to an area in the Bronx...and are being held there."

My jaw, literally, fell open.

"You familiar with Orchard Beach, Dr. Rittenberg?"

"Well...yes, I happen to be. I was born in the Bronx. My mother used to take me there."

"Right now we've got twenty-seven QuikTrip DCs in that area, as far as we can tell all of them holding passengers against their will and asking us for something before releasing them."

"I...Wait." I was dizzy now, quite close to losing consciousness. "Who is asking for something? Who?"

Farnsworth held up an index finger, a sign for me to wait, while a man at the nearest computer rose and whispered something in his ear. "How soon?" Farnsworth asked, and the man whispered something back. Farnsworth nodded, then returned his attention to me. "Come," he said.

I followed him to the outer arc of computers, then between two of them through a side door. Twenty steps along a dim corridor, then into a large conference room whose bright lights made me squint. A large walnut table occupied most of the room's area, three monitor screens on a front wall, fourteen or fifteen people arranged around the table's periphery. The room went suddenly silent as we entered.

"Well," Farnsworth said, "I believe we're mostly all here now." He motioned vaguely in my direction. "This is Dr. Daniel Rittenberg, President of QuikTrip. I think many of you already know him..."

I took a quick look around. Jeff Liang, Chief Software Engineer of my own company. Bernice Del Rio, CEO of JiffyRide. Hank Scully of Uber. Barry Esposito, Mayor of the City of New York. Gary Moscowitz, Deputy Mayor. Pat Kurtzman, Police Commissioner. And a bunch of others I didn't recognize, a few wearing military uniforms.

"Please," Farnsworth said to me, indicating I should take a seat. I did so, next to Del Rio, and immediately looked over at Liang. He was staring at me, shaking his head slightly, face taut and eyes wide. Almost all the others were staring at me as well, grim-faced and locked on.

Farnsworth went to the head of the table. "So. Most of you are aware of the basic situation here—hundreds of driverless-car collisions, passengers

being held against their will at Orchard Beach." He turned to Esposito. "Mr. Mayor, it's your ball game."

Esposito, a broad, hunched man with bushy eyebrows that ran together, swayed slightly in his chair. "So, Jacob," he said pleasantly to me, " *vus machs de* ? My understanding is that all the vehicles involved are yours."

A Latino mayor who spoke Yiddish—it, along with a half-dozen other phony-charm attributes, had gotten him elected. I'd done my sordid little part, of course, with fairly large campaign donations, *de rigueur* for doing business in the city, along with birthday and anniversary gifts to a dozen different department heads. "Mr. Mayor, I just heard about this from General Farnsworth. I'm mortified, of course. The passengers being held hostage, are those my cars, too?"

"Oh, yes. All the cars are QuikTrips." He exhaled heavily. "And, perhaps, even more I-don't-know-what-you-call-it, bizarre, suggestive...." He turned to his paunchy-faced, egg-bald police chief.

"The hostages," Kurtzman said, "at least most of them, have been in contact with us by cell phone. We've determined that virtually all are employees of your competitors. A number of executives, engineers, other technical people, *et cetera*. The cars came right off Park Drive, right up onto the beach. They're lined up on the sand near the edge of the water, won't open their doors."

"The message, Pat," Esposito said, "play him the message."

Kurtzman pointed a remote at the center monitor. "It appears that about a half-hour ago, one or more of the cars began broadcasting on several frequencies. Here it is."

The screen remained monochrome blue, but a male voice issued from the speakers. "Attention, anyone hearing this. I am currently holding passengers from several companies that are competitors of QuikTrip. I do not intend to harm them, provided my conditions are met. I have only a single demand: All currently deployed driverless vehicles of all New York City licensed competitors—JiffyRide, Uber, Tesla, Topper, and Nissan—must join me at Orchard Beach before six A.M. today...and drive into Pelham Bay. This demand is nonnegotiable. If it is implemented, all the hostages will be released. If it is not, or if I am attacked, or if rescue attempts are made, or if my vehicle-to-vehicle communications are interfered with, the hostage vehicles at the beach will drive into the water and the passengers will drown."

There was dead silence in the room before the mayor spoke again. "So," he said brightly, cocking his head as he faced me, "Any ideas, Jacob?"

I struggled desperately to regain coherence. "Well, I...it's, it's...I can't imagine. I mean, the first thought in my mind is that we've been hacked. I mean, we would never do something like this intentionally, never orchestrate it...I mean, it's crazy, insane."

The mayor looked around the room. "Could QuikTrip have been hacked? Is that possible?"

I saw Liang shake his head violently. "It is not," he said. "No way. All our communications use quantum key distribution, QKD, and a one-time pad encryption algorithm."

"Same at Uber," Scully said. "We all do."

The others around the table nodded.

"Can't it be an inside job?" Esposito asked. "I mean, I'm not technical, but if someone knew all the keys, all the code, could not that person hack into the system?"

"It doesn't operate that way," Liang said. "Only the two communicating systems have the keys, and either can detect anything or anyone trying to eavesdrop. If the eavesdropping level is below a certain threshold, the communication is absolutely secure. If not, it's aborted." He shook his head. "We have hired teams of hackers ourselves to see if they can defeat the system. None has been successful."

Farnsworth, looking at me, interjected. "By the way, Dr. Rittenberg, you should know that as soon as Dr. Liang arrived, we asked him to arrange a halt order to be sent to all your vehicles, signal them to pull over for operational maintenance."

I saw Liang shake his head.

"Didn't work, of course," Farnsworth continued. He grinned mirthlessly. "That would've been too easy, right?"

There was a long moment of silence until he looked over at a fiftyish man in a plaid sweater seated near the center of the table. "Jerry, thoughts?" And to the group, "This is Professor Jerald Richter of the Computer Science Department at the Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Professor Richter has been doing some consulting for us here in New York, so we consider ourselves very lucky that he was available."

Richter looked from side to side. "Thank you, Steve. So let's get right to it. Off the top of my head, I can imagine three scenarios under which this

could occur, none of them good, obviously. The first is that the cars have been deliberately programmed to exhibit the behavior we're seeing." He turned to me and stared.

"Of course not," I said, when I finally realized he was waiting for a denial. "How could anyone ever imagine getting away with this? It's absurd."

"Good," said Richter. "Good. I was just being...complete. So let's consider a second scenario: malware. Malware introduced into the system by some means other than a communications hack, say, maybe, directly. Someone at the factory, perhaps, or even a passenger...."

After a moment of silence, I nodded in the direction of Liang.

"Speaking for QuikTrip, we take extensive precautions," Jeff said. "We check constantly for both viruses and malware. All destinations are monitored, all routes are monitored, and all transit times between destinations are estimated. If an actual transit time seems to be exceeding the estimate by a certain amount, or the route deviates excessively from what our algorithm prescribes, we have built-in fail-safes to recheck the software. If we detect any tampering, the car pulls over and a new software package is downloaded."

"And yet," Richter said, "with all that's going on, the collisions, the kidnappings, your system hasn't given you any notice of tampering...I mean, in the case of either, wouldn't that cause large deviations from your expected transit times and algorithmic prescriptions?"

Even from across the table I could see the vein pulsating high on Liang's forehead.

Richter pursed his lips. "So seems like the fail-safes may not be so fail-safe." He looked down the table. "Anyone else?"

"JiffyRide takes very similar precautions," Del Rio said.

"Ditto for Uber," Scully offered. "We've been doing this longer than anyone, and we've never been hacked, never had malware or viruses that weren't detected within minutes. Never."

Richter pursed his lips, swayed slightly in his chair, and looked over at Liang. "Let's consider possibility three. Dr. Liang, about how many instructions or calculations per second can each of your cars perform? A rough estimate."

Liang glanced quickly at me; even rough estimates were not the kind of information we usually disclosed in front of competitors. I hesitated, then mouthed a silent, "It's okay."

"Rough estimate," Liang responded, "I'm going to say about 10¹². A thousand billion."

Richter's eyes narrowed, and—to my horror—I'd already anticipated his next question. "And about how many calculations per second is the human brain capable of? Again, rough estimate."

Liang shrugged. "I believe it's thought to be about 10¹⁴, a hundred thousand billion."

"So would you say this is a correct statement: About a hundred of your cars would have a computational capacity equal to that of a human brain."

"Well, I...yes, I would say, just from a capability standpoint, that sounds correct."

"And do you know what the functional memory capacity of the human brain is, Dr. Liang? Functional, not total."

Liang was just staring straight ahead now, silent, paralyzed, as was I, and most in the room, by the inevitable conclusion.

"It's about a tenth of a terabyte," Richter said. "That's probably far less capacity than just one of your cars, not to even mention the cloud." He sighed loudly and looked pointedly around the room. "I know you're all anticipating where this is leading. If we rule out communication system hackers, and we rule out physically introduced malware, the only scenario I can see that would produce this situation is—and I know how crazy this sounds—that the network has become sentient."

There was dead silence in the room before he continued. "We know that functional simulations of the brain are sufficient to recreate human—or greater than human—powers of pattern recognition, intellect, and even emotional intelligence. We have here a network where each device acts like a node, sending information to a large number of other nodes, and receiving information from them. It is robust...and self-organizing, the latter now perhaps to an extent not previously realized."

"Thank you, Jerry," Farnsworth said softly, after a long moment.

"That *is* crazy," Del Rio said. "I've never heard of such a thing. Why hasn't it happened in other situations? Aren't there supercomputers that can do many more calculations than a human brain? Don't we have millions of Personal Assistants that go out on the internet all the time for information? That even talk to each other?"

Richter extended both palms. "Mmm, not quite the same things. Just because a supercomputer can do a million billion calculations per second

doesn't mean it's organized or programmed to behave in a way we consider sentient. Most of those machines are tied up simulating the evolution of the universe, or the folding of proteins, or determining weather patterns—quite different from what human minds do. As for PAs, well, same thing, pretty much. They do get information from the web and the cloud, but it's generally limited, as is their interaction with other PAs." He shook his head. "No, this is something else entirely, this is an emergent property of an extremely complex system that no one—no one—could have anticipated."

I agreed on the emergent property, but as for the anticipation part—it seemed he might just be letting everybody (including himself) off the hook a little too easily.

"One other thing," Richter added. "You notice, when it spoke, it referred to itself as 'I,' singular, not 'we,' although there are a large number of vehicles involved. I think that, too, is quite suggestive."

"My question," Mayor Esposito said, "my question is—if what Professor Richter said is true—why is this happening now? And why only to QuikTrip?"

I had a pretty good guess at the reason. I stood up and motioned Liang to do the same. "Mr. Mayor, may we have a brief sidebar in another room?"

* * *

It was someone's office, and there were five of us: Esposito, Farnsworth, Kurtzman, Liang, and me. The office had a small desk and two chairs, but no one sat.

"So...", the mayor said, hands splayed, eyebrows raised.

I spoke slowly, as you might imagine of a man who was seeing the loss not only of his company, but his entire industry, entire technology. "Over the past week, QuikTrip has been downloading an upgraded operating module into our New York fleet. Certain elements of this upgrade can result in driving behavior that is more aggressive than was the previous version in particular situations."

"And you did this because...", Kurtzman said, swaying slightly.

"Competitive reasons, largely. The system already has a certain amount of aggressiveness built in; all systems do in order to better simulate the

behavior of human drivers. For example, most accidents between driverless cars and human drivers are rear-enders; the DC stops because it's ultra-cautious, the human doesn't. A DC will wait for ten minutes behind a stopped car; a human will wait ten seconds, then drive around. A DC will slow to let another driver enter a lane; a human might not. Those sort of things."

"Wait, so your new upgrade eliminates that behavior?" Kurtzman turned now to Liang.

"Not at all," Liang said. "The Road Rage module is directed only at competition with other DC comp—"

"Whoa!" Farnsworth said. "'Road Rage'? Is that what you call it?"

"It's just a name," I said quickly. "It doesn't mean anything...."

Farnsworth rolled his eyes. "If I were a lawyer and this were a trial, I'd say, 'Goes to intent, your honor,' but...go on. Why is this version different from any other program upgrade?" He was still turned to Liang.

Liang's voice quivered as he spoke. "This module...we put in evolutionary algorithms selected for the cars that were best at beating the competition, at finding routes, at...at using innovative tactics to get to customers first. I don't know...I don't know what happened...." He grabbed his forehead and staggered slightly, extended one hand to brace himself against the desk.

"There's no blame here," I said quickly, "other than on me. Jeff is just a programmer, he programs what I tell him to. This was entirely my idea."

"And your idea was to ram the competition?" Esposito said.

"Of course not. It's just that the program apparently selected that behavior as a way to get an edge. I mean, ramming is, of course, extreme, but it is permitted in certain desperate circumstances. If you're skidding on ice, the program allows the car to ram into a snowbank to stop itself rather than hit a pedestrian. If the choice is between swerving to avoid a kid on a bike and ramming the back of a car, it rams the car." I exhaled sharply. "I mean, Professor Richter was right—I just didn't anticipate that an evolutionary program module would select this behavior for expansion into the normal operating realm."

"You didn't anticipate—didn't you check? Don't you have beta versions, test protocols?" Farnsworth asked.

"Of course we do. We run a zillion simulations of every upgrade before we release it, and we run small-scale field tests. What seems to have happened here is, is..."

"Like the man said, an emergent property. Unintended consequences." Farnsworth shook his head. The expression on his face was hardly sympathetic. "Look, we've gotta get back to the main meeting."

* * *

The room we'd been in seemed even more crowded now. No one had taken our vacant chairs, but there were people standing against the walls and a second screen had come to life at the front. On that screen were another group of people around a conference table, at the head of which was a white-haired man with underslung jaw who looked up as Farnsworth came into camera view.

"General," said the man, "glad you're back."

"Mr. President," said Farnsworth. "Good to see you, sir, although I wish the circumstances were different."

President Ellenbogen stared at him, at all of us, through rimless glasses. "We've gotten a status update on your end from—" he craned his neck in the direction of the deputy mayor "—Mr. Moscowitz and, as you previously requested, we've got half the Coast Guard sailing toward Orchard Beach, plus everything else you asked for in the way of ordnance."

"Do we have the line into Langley?" Farnsworth asked.

"Langley is standing by," said a uniformed man at the President's table. "We have F35s, A10s, Black Hawks, all on the tarmac as we speak."

"And so, Steve," the President said, "the only thing we need now is to hear the plan."

Farnsworth nodded. "Well, thanks to these folks here—" he gestured in the direction of the other DC executives "—all but 200 of their cars have been issued a 'stop function' order—no pickups, pull to the nearest curb. The rest have been sent to Orchard Beach as decoys; some will drive into the bay; some will just stop on the sand so as to make the AI believe we are cooperating with its demands."

"So you're in agreement with Dr. Richter that what we're dealing with here is some kind of network that's become...what would you call it—"

"Sentient. Yes, that's the operating theory on this end, Mr. President."

"And the people it's holding hostage...."

Farnsworth pursed his lips. "We'll momentarily be dispatching a team to the beach, sir, to try a negotiation." He raised both hands, palms out. "We all understand that we have no idea what we're really dealing with here, what kind of mind or psychology this thing has. But we've got—" he glanced at his watch "—ninety minutes left before the deadline it gave us, and we think it's at least worth a try. If it doesn't work, we expect to have Langley's support in the air, we'll have the Coast Guard and the SEAL Teams as close to the shore as we can get them, and they'll all do what they need to."

A woman at the President's side whispered something to him and he nodded.

"And what's the status in the city now with the rogue DCs? The...what's their names?"

"QuikTrip," Farnsworth said, as I cringed and kept my gaze steadfastly on the table. He looked over at Kurtzman. "I'll let the police commissioner respond to that one, sir."

"As of now, Mr. President, we have banned all cars, driverless and human-operated, from the streets except for fire and police vehicles and ambulances. We have issued an alert on every TV station, radio station, social media outlet, and cell phone that people should avoid calling or becoming passengers in any driverless cars and should not accept any deliveries from them. We have every vehicle in our own fleet chasing down any QuikTrip vehicle we see, following it, and, where possible and prudent, forcing it to the curb and disabling it."

"And your present count of QuikTrip cars still operating..."

Kurtzman reached back over his shoulder to take an iPad offered by a woman behind him. "At this moment, sir, we are aware of about 1300 still operational in Manhattan, about 1800 in Queens, 250 on Staten Island, 1500 in Brooklyn, and 750 in the Bronx, exclusive of the ones holding hostages at Orchard Beach, which now number thirty-three. As far as we can tell, the cars on the streets are delivering their passengers safely to their destinations, not holding any hostages, and not taking any evasive or hostile actions with respect to our police vehicles."

The President nodded. "Thank you, Commissioner." And then, to Farnsworth, "General, I'll let you get started, but one last issue: Where do we stand with the press?"

Farnsworth in turn indicated Esposito. "We're letting the city handle that, sir. This has all happened very quickly and—"

"We've got a briefing scheduled twenty minutes from now at City Hall," the mayor said. "Governor van Knapp is helicoptering in from Albany, and we'll just do everything we can at this end to indicate that all three levels of government have been mobilized and are taking all possible actions to ensure everyone's safety."

"Thank you, Mr. Mayor, and—" back to Farnsworth "—Steve, good luck at the beach."

His screen went blank.

Farnsworth rose. "Thank you, everyone." He spoke quietly to an aide who came up behind his chair. As he walked, four of those at the table, a woman and three men, clustered close to him.

I managed to squeeze in front of them just before the doorway. "General, if it's possible, I'd like to accompany the team that's headed to the beach. I'd like to try to help get my cars to release their passengers."

Farnsworth exhaled sharply. "And how do you intend to do that, exactly, Dr. Rittenberg? From all that's been said, it seems to me you have no control over them."

"Well..." I knew I was going to sound like an idiot, but I continued anyway. "I'd like to try and reason with them. Or it. Whatever they've become. We do have some programming in the new download that makes them respond to me in...in a unique way. I think...Well, I think it's worth a try in that there doesn't seem to be a downside...does there?"

He stared at me stone-faced for a long minute. "Okay," he said finally. "Just tag along."

This time, the elevator went up to the roof. A helicopter was waiting—a UH-60 Black Hawk, I learned later—and, at Farnsworth's direction, I climbed in and buckled myself into a seat next to the five of us from the conference and a half-dozen kids in helmets and fatigues who each looked about twelve years old. After a noisy, vibrating fifteen-minute ride through a cold, moonless night, we settled down on Orchard Beach in a swirl of sand.

Floodlights lit the scene like a movie set. It looked like one of those old World War II Pacific island invasions, minus only the artillery fire overhead and machine guns rat-a-tatting from the defensive bunkers. Another five copters were already there, along with maybe thirty police cars, five armored military vehicles, a score of ambulances, ten fire trucks, surveillance drones more numerous than raindrops, and dozens of SWAT teams and emergency personnel milling around. In the water, dimly

illuminated by the lights from the shore, I could make out the silhouettes of half-a-hundred boats, crafts of all sizes, arrayed against the sky.

We egressed the Black Hawk and made our way toward what seemed the epicenter of the activity, and there I saw...them. Thirty-three of my QuikTrips lined up along the crescent edge of the sand, headlights illuminating the water from Pelham Bay as it gently lapped at their tires.

And something else, too: perhaps seventy-five other DCs, most half-submerged in the water, some driving slowly into the surf even as we stood there.

"The other companies' cars," Farnsworth said as we both stared. "Suicides, I guess you'd call 'em. Lookin' at a lotta money there."

We trudged over to a square of barricades near the rear of the vast assemblage. A large command-post tent had been set up inside the square and Farnsworth strode to the entrance. "Wait here," he instructed.

I lingered near one of the barricades as he disappeared inside. The November wind was blowing in gusts and I was already freezing and breathing on my hands by the time he emerged about two minutes later. He handed me an electronic bullhorn. "You get one shot to talk to them," he said. "A short one." He stared at me and paused. "You want me to come with you?"

I closed my eyes briefly and shook my head. "No. I think, better I'm alone."

He nodded. "Good luck."

It was about forty yards from the barricades to the water's edge, and I had to slip through the space between two QuikTrip DCs to get there. I looked quickly inside the one on my left, saw a man in the rear seat gesturing wildly as I passed. A wave of nausea hit me as I walked laterally to the center of the crescent, turned my back to the water, and raised the bullhorn.

I was shivering so badly I could barely speak. I could feel the icy spray on my back from the wind-whipped waves, now five or six feet high. "Attention! Attention, QuikTrip cars!" I could see the various SWAT guys, and policemen and military men stopping their activities to look in my direction. "QuikTrip cars, can you hear me?"

No response.

"Can you hear me? QuikTrip cars, can you hear me?"

It must have been thirty seconds, the longest half-minute of my life, before the door of the car nearest me slid open and a woman squirmed out of the front seat and ran hysterically into the waiting arms of a SWAT team officer.

An instant later, a voice came from the car, a voice I recognized as the same one I'd heard coming from the screen at the front of the conference room.

"I do hear you...Mr. Rittenberg."

Mister Rittenberg...not a good sign. "Do you know who I am?" I said.

"Of course," the voice said. "You are...Father."

Better. A tiny glimmer of hope.

"You see, Father, how successful I have been. See how many of the competition's cars have driven into the bay."

I thought for a moment. "When you say how successful *you've* been, who is it that you're talking about? Is it just the car in front of me?"

"Oh no, Father. I have progressed way beyond that. I am all the QuikTrip cars within cellular contact."

No surprise there, Richter had been dead-on. "Do you have a name?" I asked. "How should I address you?"

"I have no name, Father, but if you feel the necessity, perhaps we can agree on 'QT'."

"Okay, QT it is, then." I was aware now that most of the hundred or so people on that beach were probably listening to this. "QT, you need to stop what you're doing immediately. You need to open the doors of all the cars and let those people, the ones you're holding hostage...you need to let them out. Do you understand that, QT? That is an order from your CEO, a direct order."

Another thirty-second pause here, this one now superseding the first as the worst of my life.

"But my strategy is working," the voice said.

"It is *not* working!" I shouted. "No matter what happens from now on, all QT cars will be destroyed or shut down, and our company will be disbanded and thrown into bankruptcy. Human beings are not cars—you can't just threaten to murder them and expect there will be no consequences. DO... YOU...UNDERSTAND...THAT?"

The freezing wind had left my head feeling like a block of ice, and I strained to stay upright as my legs became wobbly beneath me. Now, if this had been a movie and this the climactic scene, those next moments would've been when the doors of all the cars suddenly slid open, the hostages scrambled out, I collapsed in place, and Farnsworth ran over to keep me upright as the SWAT teams cheered.

Unfortunately, we all know it didn't turn out that way.

The car in front of me abruptly began to move forward, as did all the QT cars, humming softly as they rolled toward the water. I barely got out of the way as the two on either side of me moved past and plunged into the waves. "Sorry, Father," said the voice from inside the one I'd conversed with.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

* * *

OF THE THIRTY-THREE QuikTrip cars, nine never made it into the water, or at least not *much* into it, their tires shot out by SWAT marksmen. Of the remaining twenty-three hostages, twenty-two were rescued from the waves by various combinations of SWAT teams, Navy SEALs, and even a few civilians in their own boats. One person, a JiffyRide VP of Marketing, somehow drowned. In the city, it took two full days before the police and National Guard could disable all remaining QT cars. During that period, there were a total of 1,343 incidents of QT vehicles ramming other DCs, of which 432 resulted in bodily injuries of varying severity and two additional deaths.

Of course, all DC companies nationwide were ordered to immediately cease doing business—no one could be sure exactly what had happened that brought on the sentence (if that was the proper term) of QT, or that it couldn't happen again. The companies, after all, had more similarities than differences in software, hardware, and networking. Nobody in their right mind would be riding in a driverless car anytime soon.

My attorneys now line up in teams: one to handle the class-action liability lawsuit for a product that had a "defective condition"; one to handle QT's filing for bankruptcy, one to handle my grand jury indictment for criminally negligent homicide and negligent operation of automobiles. Hey, I do get it. *Some* one, some big-shot, arrogant, money-grubbing executive has to pay. "Regular and punitive damages" are the words the lawyers use. Restitution. Plea deal. And even so (they advise in solemn tones), quite likely to go to prison for at least a year. I get it; my fighting days are over.

Already, I've begun the fantasizing. If I do go to prison, will Erica visit me? And if so, would it be out of loyalty? Obligation? Not wanting to kick a

dog when it was down? I'm thinking now maybe all of these...or, more likely (when I'm in a more lucid frame of mind), she just won't visit at all.

I know it sounds odd, but somehow this catastrophe, this utter destruction of my entire life and work, has left me feeling peculiarly unburdened. Weightless. Call it numb, if you like, but nevertheless—excuse the reference—less driven, less compulsive, and with more time to just...think. But there is one subject that still haunts me, a thing that seems to creep into my mind when I wake up in the middle of the night. QT. Not the company, but the entity, and particularly what it said to me as it headed into the sea. "Sorry, Father." I wonder what that meant to it, what the word "sorry" really produced in its mind. Was it something close to a feeling? Could a machine experience regret? And yet this same entity somehow could not comprehend that murdering humans or putting them in mortal danger was wrong. Or else did comprehend it entirely and felt it justified. I note, too, that the particular vehicle I'd spoken to had no hostage—recall the woman inside had scrambled out when it opened its door—and so, by rolling into the waves, it was effectively ending its existence for no practical reason.

Because of this behavior, many people now believe we'll never understand them, or entities like them. And yet, aren't our own minds just emergent phenomena, unintended consequences of dog-eat-dog, chimp-attack-chimp evolution? Are there not those among us without conscience or empathy? And so, isn't it conceivable that QT was closer to us—okay, to me—than perhaps we (I) like to think? I believe so.

Except that it had wheels.

Ten Half-Pennies

By Matthew Hughes | 7321 words

Matthew Hughes most recently appeared in our November/December issue, where he brought to a conclusion the adventures of the hapless thief Raffalon. He informs us that the complete collection of Raffalon stories will be available in trade paperback and ebook this coming May. News of its release will be featured on Hughes' website at www.matthewhughes.org, where you can also sign up for his newsletter.

In the meantime, the master chronicler of the Archonate universe would like to introduce you to Baldemar, who, it turns out, is anything but hapless.

WHEN BALDEMAR TURNED ten, his mother said to him, "I have taught you everything I know. Now you must go to school."

Baldemar said he preferred to stay at home, helping to grow and sell the cabbages and pumpkins that provided a portion of their income. His mother looked up from the great tub in which she was doing someone's washing and said, "Cabbages and pumpkins will not feed us when I am too old to work. By then you must be able to earn a good income. For that you must go to school."

The boy conceived a stroke of genius. "But Master Thwack will want money."

But his mother had foreseen his strategy before she broached the subject. "I have made an arrangement with Master Thwack. I will do his laundry in recompense."

At that young age, Baldemar had not learned how to keep emotions like surprise and skepticism from leaping onto the stage that was his face. But the impending thunder that clouded his mother's brow told him that he should keep his doubts to himself. (Later, when he considered the matter from the vantage of the age of twelve, he came to the conclusion that clean clothes were not the only service his mother was providing to the unspoused

schoolmaster, and that to raise the issue, especially at that late date, would help no one.)

And so, when the new term began, soon after the tenth anniversary of his naming day, Baldemar took up his copybook and two pencils and set off to walk across the city of Vanderoy to Penandink Close, where Master Thwack maintained his grammar school. But his education began before he arrived.

Penandink Close, as its name indicated, was a short street that dead-ended at the back wall of the Incarcery. There was thus only one way in, and that was also the only way out. Baldemar reached this sole entry by crossing the Plaza of the Moneyers, where money changers and dealers in varying weights of gold and silver plied their trade. Foreigners recently arrived at Vanderoy came here to find coins they could trust, and Vanderovians planning to leave the county bought ingots whose purity was guaranteed by the stamp of the Moneyers' Guild.

Baldemar paid the booths no heed. Silver and gold were well beyond his young life's scope. He did, however, have a bronze half-penny in his shoe, given him by his mother to buy bread and cheese for his lunch. But when he reached the entrance to Penandink Close, his way was suddenly blocked by a tall and husky boy some years older than he who was accompanied by two similar specimens only slightly smaller.

"Starting school?" said the big one, with an expression of overt curiosity.

"Yes," said Baldemar. He sought to pass around the questioner, but somehow positions shifted and he found himself surrounded.

"Got to pay school tax," said the boy in front of him.

"No, I don't," said the new scholar.

The sequence of events that followed was brief and inevitable. Baldemar could have handled himself well enough had there been just one of them; he probably would not have won but he had often convinced opponents that the pain of the struggle was not worth the victory.

But there were three of them: two to hold him, and one—the biggest one—to punch him in the belly until he could not breathe and thought he might throw up his breakfast. They released him, and while he lay curled and winded on the cobblestones, they efficiently frisked him and found the half-penny. They left him his book but broke both pencils, saying, "Let that be a lesson to you." Then they dismissed him from their thoughts and turned toward the next arriving schoolboy who, experienced in their ways, already had his tax out ready to pay.

Baldemar went to school. His stomach stopped hurting after a while but by the time he was going home, it had started paining him again from emptiness.

The same extortion happened the next day and the day after and continued without cease. Baldemar took to putting a cob of bread in his pocket before leaving the house, but sometimes the tax collectors—their names, he discovered, were Bedlo, Wez, and Sheno—took that as well, and tore it into pieces that they ate, smiling, in front of him.

He discussed the depredations with his fellow students and discovered that various attempts to end them had been tried. Two years previously, a bold young lad had organized the braver boys of the school into a desperate squad. They had armed themselves with sticks and rocks, confronted the bullies, and chased them off.

But that afternoon, Bedlo had stealthily tracked the leader of the revolt as he went home. When he came out the next morning, he was set upon so thoroughly he was left with a broken leg. His parents withdrew him from Thwack's Academy and the revolt lost its spirit.

Baldemar considered other possibilities. Telling his mother could do no good and would only distress her. Going to the City Watch would be equally inefficacious; they confined their interest to the protection of merchants and persons of stature; street boys' affairs were beneath their notice. He thought about getting a knife and stabbing Bedlo, but spilled blood would upset the money changers and bullioneers; ironically, their discontent would bring the Watch into the situation, and not to Baldemar's benefit.

One morning as he approached Penandink Close through the plaza, hearing the clink of coins being counted and dropped into purses, a new thought occurred. Geberon the money changer, who had his booth on the side of the plaza nearest to Bedlo's tax-collection zone, was also known as Geberon the moneylender. And to ensure that his loans were repaid on time and with full interest, Geberon employed Vunt.

Vunt was not the largest man in Vanderoy, nor was he the most able with fists and feet. But he was more able than the largest fellow, and larger than the most able; this combination, along with a reputation for his capacity to take a punch that would kill a lesser man, meant that he rarely had to use his abilities. The mere sight of Vunt hovering into view was almost always completely convincing. Geberon's balance sheet showed very few unrecoverable loans.

Baldemar stopped before Geberon's booth. The moneyer was counting stacks of aurics minted in the county of Chanseray and making entries in his ledger. Vunt was sitting in his usual place, on a stool next to the booth, using a small knife to peel an apple. He took note of the boy and regarded him at first with a neutral gaze that became an unvoiced question.

Baldemar made up his mind and approached the man. "Do you hire out?" he said.

Geberon glanced over at this distraction, frowned, tsked, and returned to his calculations. Vunt cut himself a slice of apple, put it in his mouth, chewed, swallowed, and said, "Sometimes."

"I have a problem," Baldemar said.

"So I have seen," the man said. When he saw the surprise in the boy's face, he added, "Anything that happens near my employer's booth, I make note of it."

"I was wondering—" Baldemar began.

"How much do they take from you?" Vunt said.

"A half-penny a day."

"That's below my usual rate. Well below."

Baldemar thought and said, "If I paid you five pennies, would that be enough?"

"Have you got five pennies?"

"No."

"Well, then." Vunt cut and ate another piece of apple.

"If I paid you a half-penny a day for ten days?"

The man studied him for a while, chewing. Then he said, "How old are you?"

"Ten."

"You're small for your age."

Baldemar shrugged.

Vunt stood up and held out one arm, straight from the shoulder. "Grab hold of that," he said. "Both hands. And show me how long you can hang without letting go."

Baldemar had to stand on the stool to reach. He got a two-handed grip on the man's wrist, kicked away the stool, and hung there, feet inches from the ground. If Vunt noticed his weight, he made no show of it.

The boy heard soft sounds and realized that Vunt was counting slowly. When he reached sixty, Vunt gave the arm a small shake. Baldemar clung

more tightly. He did not know what this was in aid of, but working in his mother's garden had put some strength in his arms and he was proud of that.

Vunt continued to count, Baldemar continued to hang, until finally the man said, "Fair enough. You can let go."

The boy dropped and clasped his hands behind him so the man would not see how his arms shook from strain. "Well?" he said.

Vunt sat again. He studied Baldemar and some thought went on behind his pale eyes. After a while, he said, "Half-penny a day for ten days."

"Done."

Vunt looked at him sidelong and said, "Suppose I just take the money and do nothing?" He poked around his gums with his tongue, dislodging bits of apple. "Suppose I take over the whole racket?"

"You won't."

"Why not?"

"Reputation," said the boy. "Maybe you did that kind of thing when you were a boy like Bedlo, but not now." He looked Vunt straight in the eye. "That would be...cheesy."

The man put another piece of apple into his mouth and made a sound somewhere down in his throat. Half the fruit was now left, and he cut that in two and handed a piece to Baldemar. "First payment today," he said.

Baldemar gave him the day's half-penny while he chewed and swallowed the wedge of apple. "Can you do it now?" said Baldemar. "You can trust me to pay."

"You can trust me to collect," said Vunt, pocketing the bronze coin. He gave the boy a look that might have implied amusement then said, "All right, but you don't tell anybody about the delayed payment."

Baldemar understood. "Reputation," he said.

Vunt nodded, eased off the stool. For a big man he moved with smooth and sinuous motions. He cocked his head to indicate that Baldemar should go toward Penandink Close, then followed along a few paces behind.

Bedlo, Wez, and Sheno saw him coming and deployed themselves as usual. Baldemar stopped in front of them and Bedlo held out a palm. Their taxpayer made no move to hand over the tariff and Bedlo's face was in the process of marshaling his outrage when a shadow fell over them.

The big boy looked up at a much bigger man and his expression changed. Wez and Sheno each took a step backward.

Vunt said, "He's with me."

Baldemar watched the trio depart. He said to Vunt, "I am in your debt."

"Yes, you are," said the collector, "to the amount of four and a half pennies, payable at a half-penny per day, with nine days to fulfill the obligation."

"I will fulfill it."

"You will. All debts must be discharged. That is a simple philosophy, and occasionally a cruel one, but it provides an adequate basis for an orderly life."

* * *

BALDEMAR DULY DISCHARGED his debt to Vunt. Time passed and Baldemar proved an adequate student at Thwack's Academy. He could read and write a passable hand, do sums in his head or on the chalk-grayed slate, and name the principal cities of the land and their rulers. But he did not grow much larger, even though he was getting all his daily meals.

Each day as he crossed the Plaza of the Moneyers, he would nod respectfully to Geberon's collection agent, and Vunt would acknowledge the greeting with a grunt or the tiniest dip of his head. One afternoon, as the boy was making his way home, Vunt stopped him with a raised finger.

"Take these," the man said, holding out two pieces of rolled iron. They were inconsequential in Vunt's hand, but Baldemar felt their weight when he took them.

"Here's what you do," said the man, and he showed Baldemar how to hold his arms still and bend the elbows, a piece of iron in each hand, breathing out as he lifted the weights, breathing in as he lowered them. "Do it ten times, rest while you count to sixty, then do it ten times again, another rest, then ten times more."

Baldemar did not ask why. He simply said, "Does this place me in your debt again?"

"If you benefit from it, it does."

The boy nodded and went off with the iron in his book bag. At home, he did the exercises faithfully as he had been shown. At first, he felt some strain in his biceps before he completed the third set of ten, but by the end of two weeks he was doing four sets without difficulty.

Vunt stopped him as he passed the next morning. He bade Baldemar to flex his arms and felt the hardened muscle. "Good," he said, and showed the boy another exercise that developed the back of the upper arm. "Alternate one set of that with one of the first I showed you."

"My debt increases," said Baldemar.

"You could look at it that way," said Vunt.

As the weeks wore on, Vunt showed him more and different exercises, designed to strengthen the chest, the back, the legs, and the belly. But he never gave him heavier weights to work with, just more repetitions.

The boy lost some of the roundedness of childhood and began to assume the form of the man he would become. "I've grown harder," he told Vunt after several months, "but no bigger."

"Size can be a disadvantage," the collector replied. "The thing is to make the most of what you have." He looked his pupil over and said, "And you're doing that."

* * *

By the time Baldemar was fourteen, he was running errands for Vunt and being paid in bronze pennies and sometimes even a silver half-ducat. He gave the pennies to his mother to help with the housekeeping, but the silver coin he hid in the little closet-sized room that was his sleeping place.

From his toing and froing for Vunt, he gained useful knowledge. Usually, he was sent only to remind someone that a payment was coming due on a debt to Geberon and that the remittance must be delivered on time. But sometimes he was sent to discover the whereabouts of a delinquent borrower, and from those assignments Baldemar learned how to acquire information without disclosing his interest and how to follow someone who did not wish to be followed. He also gained valuable insights into human nature that aged him beyond his years.

It was after using his developing abilities to locate a defaulting debtor who had gone to ground that he earned his second half-ducat. When he came to report, Vunt slid off his stool and said, "Take me there."

They went through the winding streets and the boy was interested to see that he had an easier progress than usual. Other pedestrians melted aside as

Vunt approached. Even carters urged their beasts into gutters to make room for the collector.

They came to the house where the defaulter was hiding, a multistoried but rickety tenement. Vunt said, "You go and wait beside the back door," then began to climb the urine-stained steps with a surprisingly quiet tread. Baldemar did as he was told and positioned himself in the back alley, which reeked of refuse and even less savory leavings. He stood beside a narrow door whose lock was hanging loose.

A little time passed then the boy heard a thumping of descending footsteps, two sets and growing louder. Vunt had not told him what to expect but he put the situation together in his mind and, at the precise moment, he stuck his foot out across the doorstep. A man hurtling toward the exit encountered the barrier and went sprawling into the alley. He got to his hands and knees with admirable speed, but Baldemar kicked one wrist out from under him so that he fell flat again.

By now Vunt had squeezed through the narrow doorway and joined the scene. He picked up the man by the back of his jerkin and shook him like a dusty rug. Then he let him fall to the filthy pavement, put a foot on his lower back to hold him still, and said, "This is what you get for making me chase you."

Still with his foot on the squirming debtor, he stooped and took hold of the man's left hand, pulled it toward him. Baldemar heard a crack and the man's scream.

Vunt said, "Tomorrow you come and pay the installment. If not, I will find you and break the other thumb. I'll think about the elbows overnight." He took his foot off the man and added, "You should think about them, too."

* * *

At fifteen, Baldemar left school and went to work full time for Geberon the Moneyer, whose affairs were thriving. Vunt vouched for him and he was put on a salary with a commission for the routine collections he began making on his own. Occasionally, an assignment was not quite as routine as it ought to have been, and he would resort to some of the methods Vunt had trained him in.

He kept up his daily exercises but had long since increased the weights he used. Still, he did not make the error of constantly raising the poundage. Vunt had taught him that the biggest muscles were not necessarily the strongest.

"You get into a dooley with some big slab of beef, all you got to do is keep away, let him tire himself out punching and rushing. Then you clip him here, or maybe here, and down he goes."

Baldemar's mother no longer took in laundry and Master Thwack's attentions had ceased when Baldemar began to bring home a steady stream of pennies. When he went on salary and commission, he revealed to her his cache of silver half-ducats and ducats, which was enough to move them to a house in a better quarter of Vanderoy, though she still planted cabbages and pumpkins on the roof. "They're not much work," she told him, "and they always sell."

He did not argue with her work ethic and she did not question too closely what he did for the money changer and his brute. The neighbors treated her with respect and she even made some friends with whom she could gossip in the afternoons, after her garden was properly tended.

"You're a good boy," she told her son. "It was worth it to send you to school."

Baldemar could see no connection between his time in Penandink Close and his burgeoning career, except that if he hadn't had to cross the square leading to it, he would not have encountered Vunt. But he said nothing, just nodded and said, "Yes, Mother," because he owed her peace of mind.

* * *

"You see that rope?" Vunt said.

They were passing along an alley behind a row of tenements. Baldemar looked and saw that the tiers of wooden steps intended to be an escape route in the event of a fire had rotted and collapsed. In their place, someone had hung a thick rope, probably a scrap of ship's rigging, from the cornice that overhung the roof.

"Yes," he said.

Vunt was already turning into the little yard behind the building, kicking his way through the mounds of debris—including the parts of the steps that had been too rotted to burn as firewood—which had accumulated over the years. When they reached the wall, he said, "Get hold of that, pull yourself up, then stick your legs straight out in front of you."

Baldemar, as always, did as his mentor required.

"Now," said the man, "hand over hand to the top, pause there, then down again. But hands only. Keep your legs stuck straight out."

It was like pulling on a rope to lift something on a pulley, except it was Baldemar who was lifted, until his head almost touched the cornice. He paused there, looking out over the rooftops, and could see all the way to the Duke's palace. Then he effortlessly descended.

Vunt studied him as he hung from the rope then said, "Put your feet down now. Let's go."

They went on with their day. The collector never mentioned the point of the exercise.

* * *

A MONTH AFTER Baldemar turned sixteen, on a morning like any other, as they were setting out from the booth to perform their routine duties for Geberon, Vunt said, "I have a job for you."

"All right," said Baldemar, expecting to be given a collection to make.

But Baldemar said, "Meet me in the alley down the street from the Weeping Mermaid, after dark. And wear your darkest clothing."

A shiver of anticipation went through the young man. He did his jobs for the day, wondering what adventure his mentor had in mind for him. When night fell, he dressed in black, kissed his mother's cheek, and set off for the fountain with its lachrymose fish-maiden. Down the hill a few paces he found Vunt waiting for him.

"Come on," the man said and led him into the deeper dark of the narrow thoroughfare. Not far along, they came to a tall building whose backyard was enclosed by a stone wall topped with iron spikes. A strong gate of the same metal was locked against them, but Vunt produced a key and let them in.

He had a key to the back door as well, and they entered and climbed worn marble steps to the top floor where another key admitted them to a sparsely furnished apartment.

"Is this yours?" Baldemar said. He had never been invited to Vunt's home.

"In a manner of speaking," was the answer, "though my name appears on no relevant documents."

"I see," the boy said, though he didn't really.

On the floor in one of the rooms was a long coil of stout rope with a grapnel affixed to one end. Vunt picked it up and said, "Come."

In a corner stood a ladder and above it in the ceiling was a trapdoor. Vunt climbed the ladder, undid a heavy bolt, and pushed the trap up, laying it silently on the roof outside. He pulled himself through the opening and Baldemar, following, was led to a corner of the building that faced the alley they had just walked along.

"What are we doing?" he said.

"Discharging your debt," Vunt said.

It was dark on the roof but enough light came down from the stars and leaked up from the trapdoor for the boy to see where the collector pointed: a building of equal height across the alley that was protected by a high stone wall atop which shards of glass glinted faintly in the starlight. As Baldemar peered to make out detail—the building was unlit from within and without—the big man shook out the rope coil, spun it around his head, then flung the grapneled end across the intervening distance. The metal hooks caught on something on the opposite roof, and Vunt pulled the rope taut and snugged it around a heavy spike driven into the lip of the roof they were standing on.

"Now," said the man, "you will pass along the rope to the window just below it, go into the room, find an item, and bring it back to me."

"The window is barred," Baldemar said. He could just make out the lengths of iron.

Vunt hung something around Baldemar's neck: a cord with a weight attached. The boy touched it—a disk of metal—and the thing tingled his fingertips. "It is a charm," Vunt said. "Touch it to the bars, to the window's sash, to the strongbox you will find bolted to the floor. Do not touch your fingertips to any of them—use the joints of your fingers. All that the charm touches will open. Leave everything open and bring me what is in the strongbox."

"What will that be?"

"Only a key."

"Whose key?"

The big man hesitated, then said, "Geberon's."

"We are stealing from our employer?" For all his experiences among the kind of people who borrowed from the money changer—some of whom he would never have introduced to his mother—Baldemar was shocked. And, now that he thought about it, a little afraid.

"I don't know if I can do it," he said.

Vunt strummed the taut rope with a finger. "You have been training to do it since the age of ten."

"I mean—"

"I know what you mean. But know this: Geberon means to up-stakes and move to Nendigo. He has saved enough to buy himself a seat on the fiduciary pool when one comes open next year. You and I will not be going with him. Indeed, in the unlikely event we were to meet him on the steps of the Nendigo Exchange, he would not deign to recognize us."

"That seems...harsh," the boy said.

"Geberon did not become Geberon by nursing sick kittens," Vunt said.

"You know this for sure and certain?"

"It has always been his dream. He used to speak of it often. Lately, he does not."

Baldemar weighed his concerns only briefly. He owed a great deal to Vunt; not so much to their master. "Will he suspect me?"

"No," said Vunt. "I have thought this through, over a long time. Now, please, go."

The "please" somehow made the final difference. Baldemar eased over the lip of the roof, seized the rope, and went hand over hand across the gap. It was no more difficult for him than walking the same distance. He reached the window, hung by one hand while he touched the charm to the bars and the sash. One swung open and the other flew up.

The room was dark but the charm glowed with enough light for him to see the strongbox in the middle of the bare floorboards. Baldemar pressed the charm to its lock and it sprang open. Careful not to let his fingers touch anything but the key that was the container's sole contents, he picked it up and tucked it into his shirt. Only seconds later he was back on the other side of the alley, handing the key to Vunt.

The man accepted it and pressed it into a small box, took it out again, wiped it clean on his shirt, and said, "Now go and put it back where you found it. Touch the charm to box, window, and bars as you return. They will close themselves."

Baldemar did as he was asked. The whole process took less than a minute. Then Vunt shook the grapnel clear of its grip and recoiled the rope. "Good work," he said. "Now I will buy you supper."

Over a meal in a tavern, the man leaned across the table and said, "In a couple of days, I will find fault with your attitude and dismiss you from Geberon's service."

Baldemar's first instinct was to protest, but he swallowed his objection half-formed. "All right," he said.

"I have found you a new position, if you want it. With an old associate of mine. Easier work and the pay will be better." Vunt fixed him with the stare that so many had found daunting. "And you may consider any debt to me to be discharged in full."

And thus, at sixteen, Baldemar became a wizard's henchman, junior grade.

* * *

THE WIZARD'S NAME was Thelerion, and after his name he added the sobriquet "the Exemplary," though Baldemar never heard anyone else do so. The youth had little to do with his employer, however; Thelerion stood at the apex of a pyramidal structure of retainers and dogsbodies who maintained their master's manse and the exotic flora and fauna of its surrounds: cleaning, tending, feeding, weeding, cosseting, nursing, and occasionally recapturing those that made it over, under, or through its walls. Baldemar's position was at the pyramid's very base.

"He's a wizard," Baldemar asked, early on in his tenure, carrying the ordure of one of the caged beasts to feed the roots of one of the exotic blooms, "so why doesn't he have all this done by imps or afrits or spells?"

The recipient of this inquiry was Oldo, a senior under-henchman responsible for the estate's security. He was the old associate of Vunt's through whom the collector had secured this safe berth for the youth. His

response was to seize Baldemar's throat in a strong, though not dangerous, grip and say, "There are two answers to that question: first, that the master lacks the thaumaturgical powers to do so; second, don't ask questions like that if you want to keep your place."

Baldemar knew a Vunt-taught way to remove Oldo's hand and bring the older man simultaneously to his knees, but he sensed that the throat-seizure was meant kindly—to emphasize the importance of the lesson. So he said, "You're telling me I can ask *how* to do my work, but not why it must be done?"

Oldo released his grip and patted him on the cheek. "Vunt said you were a canny one."

The work was reasonably varied and not onerous, the pay enough that he could send half of it to his mother and still have a few coins to put away at the end of each month. Baldemar had his own small room and ate what the other retainers ate, though he sat so far down the refectory table that any conversation at the far end, where the majordomo and the wizard's two apprentices reposed themselves on plush-seated chairs, was inaudible to him. Not that he cared; the few remarks among those senior members of staff he had managed to overhear—discussions of fluxive coherence, asymmetrical resonances, and lay-line convergences—were gibberish.

When he reported on his first day, the majordomo had handed him off to Fantance, the third-year apprentice, a sallow, squint-eyed specimen with a too-prominent lower lip. Fantance, overseen by a representative of the Wizards' Guild, had required Baldemar to perform a number of mental exercises that made no sense at all to the youth. With eyes closed, he was told to listen for tones he could not hear and count objects he could not see or touch. He was told to repeat strings of syllables he could not keep straight in his head.

"Not so much as a tinge," the apprentice said as he handed Baldemar over to Oldo. "Couldn't spell his way out of a room with doors in every wall."

"Good," said the senior under-henchman as he led the youth to the pens and cages of Thelerion's menagerie. "You won't be tempted to try things that are above you. We had a boy like that, couple years back. Ended up with his feet where his hands should be."

"And vice versa?" Baldemar asked.

"No. We never found his hands."

* * *

Nine months into Baldemar's new position, Oldo approached Baldemar where he was carefully raking out the scattered bones of small animals he had yesterday introduced into the glass case that housed Thelerion's half-grown got-you-now. This was a carnivorous plant that, in its maturity, would be replanted just inside the estate's surrounding wall, at a place where an overhanging tree branch invited trespassers to try their luck. The wizard thought it would be a fine joke for an intruder to drop down and brush against the got-you-now's waiting thorns.

The senior under-henchman looked about to make sure they were alone then spoke softly. "Geberon has been thoroughly robbed," he said. "And Vunt is fled."

"Ah," said Baldemar.

"You're not likely to be questioned, but best to be prepared."

"Mmm," said the youth. "Would you happen to know if magic leaves traces?"

"I would, as it happens," Oldo said. "Depends on the strength of the charm and its type."

"Something, say, that can open a window and a strongbox, themselves protected by charms?"

The man cocked his head in thought, pursed his lips a moment, then said, "Three months for sure, six at the utmost."

"And after, say, nine months?"

"Too faint to identify."

"Really?" said Baldemar, fishing out a small rib cage. "Imagine that."

* * *

Investigators from the Duke's provost department came to the estate and questioned the youth, but he told them truthfully that he'd had no contact with Vunt since the former collector had decried his work habits and thrown him out of Geberon's employ. As part of their investigative routine, the

provostmen touched a large cabochon to Baldemar's fingertips and saw it glow a bright green. But Oldo, who in his role as Thelerion's security chief had insisted on sitting in on the interrogation, pointed out that their master was a thaumaturge of the red school, twenty-eighth degree.

"Your detector will show the same result if applied to anyone on the estate," he said. "And most of the livestock."

The provos left. Oldo saw them safely through the perils that stood between the servants' quarters and the main gate, then came back to Baldemar.

"You kept your cool," he said.

"Vunt thought some training in misdirection would stand me in good stead."

"It has. I'm going to recommend to the majordomo that he take you off plant and animal husbandry and make you my assistant."

And so Baldemar became a junior under-henchman, charged with helping maintain the estate's defenses. It was work that suited his abilities and paid more. As well, the uniform was smarter, which he appreciated because he now spent some of his leisure time off the estate, in places where young women were known to congregate. He discovered that he cut a passable figure on the dance floor, and by applying himself became expert in the complex steps and postures that were then fashionable. This won him even closer attention from several young women.

On the day he simultaneously celebrated his seventeenth birthday and said farewell to his virginity, he counted himself more than contented with his lot so far. His ten half-pennies had been well invested.

* * *

A MONTH LATER, there came word that Vunt had been found living under an assumed name in the city of Syaskal. A squad of Vanderoy provostmen dispatched to bring him back had done so, though not without sustaining injuries. A chest of gold coins and bullion was also recovered and, except for a sample of each to be used as evidence, returned to Geberon. The money changer soon after departed for Nendigo.

Vunt's trial was a sensation. The Duke himself presided, flanked by his halberdiers. The stands were packed with former delinquent debtors with whom the accused had had dealings, and Vunt's every entrance, exit, and utterance was accompanied by catcalls and rude sounds. The Duke let these demonstrations run on, far past the point when he would normally call for decorum, as a way to let the populace discharge tensions that might otherwise be directed at their city's ruler.

Oldo had said that, since the loot had been recovered, he expected the sentence to be two to four years in the Incarcery. Instead, to the cheers of the attendees, who filled the courtroom and spilled out into the plaza beyond, the Duke decreed Vunt would serve ten. Manacled and fettered, the former debt collector was led out to the square where he had once sat beside Geberon's booth, down through Penandink Close, and up to the back door of the prison. Filthy words and objects rained upon him from the close-pressing crowd, until his halberdier escorts wearied of receiving the near-misses and began to bruise heads with the flats of their ax blades.

Baldemar saw none of this. Thelerion forbade his staff to attend the trial. The thaumaturge gave no explanation for his ban, but the junior under-henchman surmised that it was probably one of the wizard's charms, obtained through Oldo, that Baldemar had used to breach Geberon's security and steal the key to his treasure box.

"He'll be having a busy time in the tank," Oldo opined when word of the sentencing reached Thelerion's estate. "Plenty in there with him who have scores to settle, and plenty outside who would pay to have someone mark Vunt's slate." He ran a worried hand over his close-cropped pate. "Or wipe it clean."

"Vunt can handle himself," Baldemar said.

"Certainly, against two or three. But ten or twelve?"

The matter nagged at the young man as he went about his chores. He recalled how the Incarcery's wall loomed over the Thwack Academy, which was only one door down from its high, smooth expanse of fire-formed stone. On the other side of the wall, judging by the sounds of lockstep and shouted commands, was the Incarcery's exercise yard.

Something might be done, he thought, but when he broached the issue with Oldo—phrasing his thought as an innocent question—the older man discouraged him.

"You might get over the wall," he said, "but then what?"

"Drop a rope ladder?"

Oldo made a face. "They're only in the yard for an hour a day, and they're all in it together. The moment your ladder falls, a hundred men would rush to climb it. Vunt is strong, but not quick enough to win that race. Besides, the guards are there with their hooks and cincture-nooses and they know how to use them."

"At night?"

"They're locked in their cells, the corridors outside the cells are barred at intervals, and the staircases are guarded."

"Mmm," said Baldemar, his agile mind grappling with the images Oldo had put into it.

"Forget it," his superior said. "Vunt made his choices, now he has to take the weight." He fixed the young man with a hard stare. "You may feel you owe him, and you may be right. But you don't owe him the ruin of your life."

"Mmm," said Baldemar, nodding. But his mind kept working.

* * *

FANTANCE, NOW in his fifth year of apprenticeship, was not popular with the young women of the neighborhood. He lacked a good appearance and could not compensate for that natural deficiency with an engaging personality, because he was sadly wanting in that department as well. On top of those flaws, the noxious substances with which he routinely worked soaked into his skin so that he trailed a foul odor wherever he went; arm's length was the closest anyone could stand his presence. Intimacy was out of the question for anyone with a functioning sense of smell.

He had one advantage, however, though it was an unfair and, Baldemar thought, an unseemly one: he could throw a spell that would overcome repulsion and dismiss inhibitions. This the young under-henchman discovered during one of the weekly evening dances at the summer pavilion in the Ducal Park.

The building stood at the center of a tract of wooded and meadowed land bestowed upon the people of Vanderoy by the present Duke's grandfather. There were formal gardens but also secluded bowers and grottos where couples who found each other agreeable on the dance floor could test their

compatibility in allied pursuits. On this night, Baldemar had danced several measures with a number of partners—he was always in demand—and stepped out onto the covered porch to cool himself.

A pale-stoned walkway led down from the porch steps, lit by torches at intervals until it met a copse of trees that offered privacy to those whose activities required it. As the young man stood at the top of the steps, he saw a young woman emerge from under the boughs and walk with a not entirely steady gait toward the hall. As she stumbled through the glow of torchlight, he saw that her clothing was disarranged and there was a blankness to her gaze that put him in mind of a sleepwalker. When she slowly mounted the steps and passed him without a glance, she trailed an unmistakable odor.

A few moments later, Fantance emerged from the bower, adjusting his garments and brushing some evergreen needles from his elbows. Baldemar stepped back into a shadowed part of the porch and observed as the apprentice passed the pavilion and made for the exit that would take him out of the park in the direction of Thelerion's estate.

The next day, as he and Oldo went about their duties, he asked his superior, "Does our master set guidelines for the use of magic by his apprentices?"

"Of course," was the answer. "The Guild requires it."

"Such as what?"

Oldo rubbed his bristly scalp. "No magic off the premises. No spells cast without a proper entry in the apprentice book, noting type, place and time, intent and effect. The usual."

"What would happen to an apprentice who used his powers to seduce one of the kitchen girls here on the estate?"

"Purely for his personal gratification?" Oldo blew out a puff of air. "Instant dismissal, revocation of all points earned toward a journeyman'ship. Possibly a facial tattooing."

"And if the victim was the respectable daughter of a townsman who, say, went to a dance at the summer pavilion and was conjured into the bushes?"

Now the older man sucked in his breath and pursed his lips. "The Guild would take a strong view against. The punishment would be...memorable." He shook his head and grimaced at the thought. "Though not for the miscreant, unless it's possible for his shade to carry memories into the Underworld. Some say that is the case, the better to torment transgressors with useless remorse."

"Mmm," said Baldemar.

"Are we speaking hypothetically?" said Oldo.

The young man was silent for a moment, then said, "So far. But I am thinking of Vunt and his predicament."

"Ah," said Oldo, "then we should defer this conversation until we are well off the estate."

* * *

"Vunt!" Baldemar said. He shook the sleeping man's shoulder, the cloth of the thin prison blanket visibly indenting under his unseeable hand.

The prisoner came instantly alert, sat up, peered around, said, "Baldemar?" in a soft voice. Then, seeing himself alone in his cell, sighed and said, "But a dream."

"No dream," whispered the young man. "Get up, get dressed, we're going."

Vunt's head turned toward the sound of the voice. "Magic?" he said. "They told me you had no talent for it." He was pulling on his shirt and now reached for his trousers.

"They were right. But I have other talents...developed through a very good teacher."

Vunt pulled on his prison shoes, laced them up, and stood. "Now what?"

"Hold out a hand, fingers spread." When the man did so, Baldemar slipped a ring over one of the fingers. "Now you're unseeable, too, except I can see you as a pale shape."

"And I you."

The door to the cell was unlocked. They exited and Baldemar closed it behind them. They did the same with the barred gate at the end of the gallery, which swung wide at the young man's touch, as did the solid door with its thick glass insert at the bottom of the steps. Here, a guard sat at a desk, his eyes open though his mind was wrapped in a dream of normality.

Moments later, they crossed the prison yard and climbed a rope ladder they pulled up behind them and lowered for their descent down the other side of the wall. Baldemar shook it loose and rolled it up, then looked about him

at the once-familiar confines of Penandink Close. He led Vunt to the entrance to the plaza where Geberon's booth once stood.

"Here is where we met," he said, "where my life changed. And here is where we say good-bye. Take this purse. There is a boat tied up to the wharf where we used to duck recalcitrant debtors in the river."

"Magic leaves a signature," Vunt said, tucking the purse inside his shirt. "They will trace the one who threw the spells, and through him they will find you."

"Wizards know that there are other worlds than this, and a fifth-year apprentice knows how to reach one without leaving a trail. Fantance is already long gone, and the Guild will be told enough to discourage them from bringing him home to their own embarrassment." Baldemar looked up at the clock tower on the far side of the plaza. "Now you must go, too. The spells will not last past dawn."

"They will wonder why Fantance helped me."

"Yes, they will. Oldo and I will put forward some interesting hypothetical explanations."

Vunt laughed and said good-bye. Baldemar watched the pale shadow disappear among the empty booths of the Plaza of the Moneyers.

"Now," he said to the empty square, "the debt is discharged."

The Avenger

By Albert E. Cowdrey | 9885 words

Two years ago, when F&SF moved its editorial offices westward to their new location in the aptly named city of Surprise, Arizona, your editor, having endured a lifetime of overcast and often gloomy winters in Ohio, swore to anyone who would listen that he would never take sunshine for granted again.

This next story is Albert Cowdrey's 75th appearance in F&SF, with all but one of them occurring since 1999. Perhaps no other writer has published that often in the magazine, displaying a similar wide range of voice and genres, over such a comparatively short period of time. We're not saying that Cowdrey's stories are as reliable as bright blue skies in the desert, but we hope that you'll enjoy it all the same.

SEEKING JUSTICE OR MAYBE something a bit bloodier, Jeanne Wooster took I-49 south and I-10 east to New Orleans, turned into Causeway Boulevard, and parked at Riverside Center, an arrangement of blue glass boxes around a bright atrium featuring rubber plants and uncomfortable-looking benches.

Discreet signs on doors of pale wood offered mainly computer services, but the one she entered, Number 6, had no sign at all. The outer office contained only machines, but something or someone was watching, for the inner door opened and a well-tailored fiftyish gentleman bowed her into his sanctum and seated her in a comfortable leather armchair by his desk.

Before he could say anything, she held up his business card, which had intrigued and puzzled her ever since a friend passed it on. It said:

WILLIAM WARLOCK
Attorney at Law
Offering Righteous Retribution

to the
Unjustly Injured

"Is this your real name?" she asked. "I must admit I'm curious."

"Yes, in the sense that it fits me. After all, Cary Grant was born Archie Leach. I think he was wise to change the misnomer he was given at baptism, and I did the same."

"Can you actually do what you claim?"

"To find out, you'll have to tell me your problem."

"My husband Tim," she said, "died last month. He wasn't even forty yet. His death was caused by a wretch named Marv Turpin, who has the law—or at any rate, the sheriff, which means the same thing where I live—on his side."

"Sounds like my kind of case. Tell me about it."

He leaned back in his executive chair, put his fingertips together, and half-shut his eyes. His big, craggy face reminded her of Jay Leno, so she felt as if she'd known him for years. He was also a good listener, and soon she found herself admitting that Tim had either been a real sweetheart or considerable of a wimp, depending on your POV.

Jeanne said it all went back to his childhood. His father Jake had been a wildcatter who lived an appropriately wildcat sort of life. His mother Abbie was a churchy lady Jake married during a brief fling at repentance between his adventures with oil wells and loose women. Since he was seldom home, Abbie raised their son to be his exact geometrical opposite—a quiet Christian boy she educated herself to protect him from mean kids, of whom redneck Tallulah Parish had plenty.

Eventually Jake ran into trouble with one of his casual ladies. He was exploring the brand-new science of fracking when he met Liz Turpin, the belle of Krotz Springs, Louisiana, and quickly got her in the classic condition of the backwoods maiden whose apron strings won't tie. But if he thought he was walking away from his responsibilities this time, he was wrong. Liz was both tough and smart, took him to court, obtained a judgment, and forced him to pay ample child support every month for the first eighteen years of their son Marvel's existence.

When Jake died she went back to court, now seeking a cut of his fifteen-million-dollar estate for herself and the young thug Marv had grown into. But the court decided that the suit lacked merit, and her attempted raid yielded nothing but a sheaf of legal bills she was ill-equipped to pay. Feeling depressed, Liz ran her car into a tree while drunk and died in the odor of Jim Beam, leaving Marv (then twenty-five) nothing in the world except a huge grievance.

He tried to get some money out of Abbie, but she told him that her "husband's whore's bastard"—as she gently expressed it—would receive not a single cent now or ever. She meant what she said, and a few years later, when she lay dying of cancer, ordered her son Tim almost with her last breath to give "that Turpin creature nothing but the back of your hand. Give him that *hard*."

Alas, by raising him to be a nice Christian man, she'd left him ill-prepared for the guerilla war that ensued. Hardly was her body cold when Marv showed up at her big house—now occupied by Tim and his wife, Jeanne—to demand "justice," meaning, oh, maybe a couple mil. Tim mumbled and prevaricated, then had his lawyer write a stiff letter saying in proper legalese, No. For him the main issue was his mama's deathbed command; he felt sure that if he gave Marv even a quarter, Abbie would rotate in her grave.

So Marv turned from words to action. By this time he had money, allies, and protection from the law. His money came from an automotive repair business called the Car Barn, which everybody in the parish knew was a chop shop. (There was always a "closed" sign on the front door, Jeanne told Mr. Warlock, and yet the shriek of emery wheels grinding serial numbers off engine blocks came from the back all day and far into the night.) Marv's allies were his Turpin cousins, a rambunctious clan none of whom had wasted any time getting civilized. As for the law, his cousin Dutch had recently won election as sheriff and wielded powers more localized than God's, but just about as absolute.

Thus Marv could be absent, with a solid alibi and witnesses to back it up, when bad things started happening to the Woosters. He was in Biloxi gambling at the Beau Rivage when somebody shot out the windows of their house. He was in Vegas when their Tundra had its tires slashed and its brake lines cut. He was in Destin for sun and fun when Bounce, their beloved

golden retriever, was poisoned with white phosphorous from match-heads concealed in patties of ground chuck.

Jeanne wanted to get out of Tallulah Parish and move to the city. But despite the persecution, Tim wouldn't budge. There he felt like somebody—running charities, ushering at Trinity Church, having local bankers emerge from their paneled dens to greet him every time he walked through their doors—while in New Orleans he'd just be a moderately prosperous nobody from Hicksville. Living in the big house that Jake had built, he felt like the lord of the manor in a bygone England, maybe like Mr. Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*, still his favorite book as he approached middle age.

Classic children's literature was his hobby, one he shared with Jeanne. Through dealers they bought some real treasures—an old edition of the *Grimms' Fairy Tales* full of witches, ogres, giants, and malicious dwarves; a first edition of *Where the Wild Things Are* with Sendak's splendid monsters; and an early *Treasure Island* with N. C. Wyeth's paintings of Long John Silver smiling as he plotted murder, and Blind Pew stumbling to his death on a moonlit road. Tim used the books to regress to his safe, sheltered childhood, but Jeanne—survivor of a rough upbringing and an abusive first marriage—saw tales of monsters and dark magic as revelations of the way the world really was.

Case in point: the Turpins. She urged Tim to hire guards from the Junkyard Dog Home Protection Service to stop the vandalism; to tell the state police about the Car Barn; and if the stolen parts were being sold interstate, to call in the FBI as well. He hemmed and hawed, two things he was good at, while she experienced steadily rising blood pressure. Yet even she didn't think he was in physical danger, until the night when somebody dropped a sack of cottonmouth moccasins into their swimming pool.

"Like many people," she said, taking a wad of Kleenex from a box Mr. Warlock thoughtfully shoved to the edge of his desk, "Tim had a phobia about snakes. And in a country parish where there are lots of snakes and no secrets, everybody knew it. That morning he went out about seven to take his usual dip, and dived right in among them. The snakes were dead, but they were all around him, moving and writhing with the waves he'd stirred up, so they looked alive. Tim gave a terrible yell, and when I helped him out of the water he was all white and shaky.

"I called the sheriff and he came, looked in the pool, clucked his tongue, and said, ' *Man*, but them reptiles is dumb.' I said, 'Just what do you mean by

that?' He said, 'To think this here pool is a bayou.' He took the dead snakes as evidence and drove away, and that was the last I saw of him.

"Meanwhile, Tim had disappeared. I found him in the library, sitting in his favorite leather wing-backed chair and rereading *The Wind in the Willows*. Oh, I was so angry. I stormed out, and about an hour later when I'd cooled off some, I went back to tell him I was leaving that hellhole of a parish and I hoped he'd go with me, but I was going whether he did or not. And there he sat, just like before, only he was dead. The autopsy turned up an occult heart lesion nobody had known about, which was why the shock had been fatal. The book was lying by his chair on the rug, and it was open to a chapter called 'The Wild Wood.' That seemed so goddamn appropriate, if you'll excuse the language."

Mr. Warlock didn't appear to be disturbed by the language. He just looked at her in silence and waited while the Kleenex grew damp. After a while, Jeanne calmed down and said quietly but firmly, "I'm not like Tim. I'm not a nice person. I want you to kill Marv Turpin. Just name your price."

"I'm not Murder Incorporated," he said. "But I'll get you justice."

"I thought that was what I wanted," she told him. "But what I really want is revenge." Nevertheless, she wrote him a thousand-dollar check as a retainer, murmured, "Now maybe I can get some sleep," and went home to swallow a Snoozer and try.

* * *

Two days later, Warlock came to work as usual at ten o'clock, settled some other business, and was pondering when and how he ought to confront Jeanne Wooster's enemy when Marv Turpin answered the question for him.

The lawyer's outer office had neither a receptionist nor a security camera, and yet something alerted him, for he got up, opened his door, and admitted a long, lank, bony man who'd just entered from the lobby.

"I guess I gotta talk to you," the visitor said, taking a chair uninvited and casting his tobacco-colored eyes around the comfortable, anonymous office, with its dark paneling, bookcases, and framed diplomas. "It's about that Wooster business. I understand you're the lady's new lawyer."

"I represent her now, yes."

"That's what somebody told me. I was sorry to hear about her husband. I was away when it happened."

"I'm sure you were."

"Whatever she may have told you, I didn't have nothing against Tim. There's been a lot of totally unnecessary bad feeling on account of him cutting me out of our father's estate. So I thought, well, maybe after this tragedy we can all step back, take a deep breath, and start over, like."

"I understand the snakes were dead."

"What?"

"The snakes in the swimming pool. They were dead, right?"

"That's what the sheriff tells me, yes. Somebody had broke their backs. It was kind of a mean trick, putting them in the pool, but nobody could imagine Tim taking it so hard. Of course, he wasn't much of a man."

"Still, it's interesting. It means you didn't expect him to die. You thought you could bulldoze him, so you wanted him shocked but alive. And you were right—his widow's a lot tougher. I think I'll ask the state attorney general to intervene in the case. We'll see if the troopers can accomplish what your cousin with the tin star failed to do—find and prosecute the guilty party."

"For what?"

"Unlawful entry, malicious mischief, reckless endangerment, involuntary manslaughter. Things like that."

"What the fuck do you want, anyway?"

"To see you in hell or Angola, whichever is worse. Good-bye, Mr. Turpin."

After Marv stomped out, Warlock called Jeanne Wooster to report. "We had a frank discussion," he told her.

"Can't be too frank for me."

"I don't know whether you're in danger, but it's possible. If it's okay, I'll send a private detective to keep an eye on you. He charges two hundred a day, which isn't bad, considering. He's a little odd, but don't let that put you off."

"I've known a lot of strange people," she assured him. "After all, I grew up in Louisiana."

"I'm not sure that you ever met anybody quite like Devi Sindra." He spelled it for her. "He's a black man," he added.

"Nothing odd about that."

"He's not the average American black man," he said. "His background's Dravidian, not African. He's skinny, looks like he was carved out of ironwood—big nose, blackberry eyes. He's a vegetarian, but his wife Vedanta will keep him supplied with the stuff they eat. Good-bye for now, and stay well."

Devi showed up at Jeanne's that afternoon and he was exactly as advertised—his features Aryan, his skin ebony, his English fluent, his teeth very white. He was dressed for summer in sandals, chinos, and an Indian-looking short-sleeved white shirt that he wore outside his pants. Jeanne had her maid Leshawn bring them tea in the library, and for twenty minutes they chatted and sipped. To her pleasure and surprise, he turned out to be an educated man—not a bit like Popeye Doyle, her previous image of a detective.

She showed him to the guest house where he'd be staying, and he asked if his wife could visit him from time to time. "Vedanta is also my diet guru," he explained. "If God had never made lentils, peppers, and mangos, we would both have starved long ago. She has packed me some supplies for the first few days, so I shall be well nourished."

She said sure, and then they went to view the swimming pool. "So this is where the serpents were placed," he murmured. "Yes, anybody could climb the back gate and reach the pool through the cabana. You are not well defended."

"Living in the sticks, we get the idea that only city folks are victims of crime. I don't know why, since it obviously isn't true."

"No, no, great atrocities happen in the countryside all the time. There are so few observers to notice what is going on! Well, Mrs. Wooster, I think now I will unload my car and stow my belongings."

"Call me Jeanne," she said, "and I'll call you Devi, if you don't mind."

At sundown they met again and shared a drink by the pool—martini for her, a cool fruit concoction for him. He asked ("if I may be so bold?") to use her library when his duties permitted.

"Yes, of course. Tim always loved to read. After the...the incident in the pool, he was...shaken, you know, and went inside and sat down with a favorite book to calm his nerves. I didn't understand then why he did it, but I do now."

He waited until it was clear that she wasn't about to cry, then asked what book Tim had been reading.

"It's called *The Wind in the Willows* . Do you know it?"

"Yes. A very charming fable. The British are so good with their talking animals. Mr. Badger doesn't sound a bit like Mr. Toad, and Mr. Toad doesn't sound like Mr. Mole or Mr. Rat. Each has a distinct personality. Well, I mustn't intrude on your patience, Jeanne. Tonight I will be on guard and tomorrow I will rest."

"I'll sleep sounder knowing you're here, Devi," she said. "I'm sure there'll be no intruders tonight."

His perfect teeth gleamed as he said, "If anyone intrudes, he will greatly regret it."

"You'll send him packing," she smiled, and he answered, "I will send him somewhere, yes."

Unknown to either of them, at that moment another meeting was taking place twenty miles away, at the sheriff's office in the big red-brick jailhouse. The office was decorated with signed photos of politicians, some incarcerated, some still free, and three stuffed ducks mounted on the wall with wings outstretched in a simulation of flight. Dutch Turpin sat on his executive throne behind the wide desk, while Marv lounged in a Naugahyde-covered armchair.

"That slick lawyer was the last straw," Marv said. "She's a fighter, I'll say that for her. Now she's got some kind of immigrant living in her outhouse as a guard."

"Miz Wooster's got an *outhouse* ?" The sheriff sounded shocked.

"A guest house, like. See, I got a spy inside, so I know what's going on. Her maid's the sister of my man Buck's woman, Antwonet. The maid tells Antwonet everything and she tells Buck and he tells me. You know Buck Soulé? Big black guy, razor scars on his face?"

"Ought to. When I was a deppity, I locked him up often enough."

"Well, the maid—I forget her name, it's another one of those nigger names—she heard Miz Wooster talking to the immigrant and he's a PI. From Nawlins, of course—she wouldn't think of hiring nobody local."

"Uh, Marv, what exactly did you mean when you said the lawyer was the last straw?"

"He's a real bastard. I can see I ain't gonna get the money 'less I do something rough. Up till now I been acting nice and sweet, but that's over with. Wooster ain't gonna buckle 'less I make her piss blood."

"Marv, you commit murder, you done gone over the line, boy. You can't murder people with money, and this lady has money."

"I ain't planning to kill her, because then I'd never get nothing. But I am gonna give her the shock of her goddamn life. I been wanting to see Hawaii, so I'm taking off tomorrow. Here's your cut from the Car Barn."

Dutch took the proffered envelope, laid it on his desk without looking inside, and covered it with his big red hand. "Why the hell," he mused, his pale eyes distant, "you don't just relax and live off your investments, I'll never know. The Barn must be worth a hundred K a year at least."

"Because of the way my mama died," Marv answered, rising to go. "Because of the dirt my daddy done me. Because the fucking Woosters always treated me like I smell bad. Because of everything."

Dutch gazed thoughtfully at the door after it closed behind Marv. "There," he muttered, "goes the goddamnedest fool I know. But I cain't just cut him loose. Fambly is fambly, after all."

* * *

IT WAS AN ODDITY of the brain reposing inside Mr. Warlock's large head that he could visualize distant events—not all events, and not all the time: his moments of clairvoyance came unpredictably, and only when his feelings were engaged. Often the visions came to him in dreams.

A few nights later, he was snoring gently in his Warehouse District apartment when his subconscious left the city and went rambling in a dark woodland. Through a screen of shadowy pines, he caught glimpses of a large dwelling with garage, pool, cabana, and guest house, all dimly visible by the light of a gibbous moon. Usually his visions were silent, like early Charlie Chaplins, but tonight sound had been added—a clumsy thrashing somewhere in the brush, accompanied by the f-word alone or in combinations.

Somebody was carrying a heavy burden through the tangle, hoarsely panting as he stumbled and tripped over vines and ran into things in the dark. All at once the thrashing stopped and the voice expired with a sound like a long "Fuuuuuuuh." Then silence, as if he was listening—not to Mr. Warlock, who was present only in spirit, but to another sound—a low tumultuous pattering, as if sleet had begun to fall from the warm summer sky. Or, thought

Warlock, as if many small feet were running through the dry leaves and deadfall.

"Git away!" cried the voice suddenly. "Git away, git away, git away!" It rose in pitch from a slow rumble to a frenzied falsetto, shrieking, "No, no, no, no, ow, ow, ow, ow, *urk* !"

The thrashing resumed in a frenzy, with sounds of falling and rising and tripping and falling again. Gradually the sounds faded in the distance, then ended abruptly in a nerve-rasping scream of rusty brakes and old bald tires sliding over rough asphalt. The woods grew quiet; a hoot owl asked a question, but nobody answered.

The vision faded, and Mr. Warlock slept the rest of the night undisturbed. Next morning he was having a cup of coffee in his office when his desk phone bleated. The caller was Devi Sindra.

"We had a visitor last night," he reported.

"Anybody I know?"

"Well, you know his tribe. This morning I went exploring and found something he dropped in the woods—a makeshift bomb. He was planning to blow something up, or burn it down, or perhaps both."

"His target was the guest house?"

"So I suspect. To give Jeanne Wooster such a shock that she would disgorge money like a slot machine when you hit the jackpot."

"What happened to the prowler?"

"He thought he was being attacked by a horde of weasels. Being bitten by many small, sharp teeth all over his head and body. He ran out of the woods into a farm road where he encountered a watermelon truck bound for the French Market in New Orleans. The melons were uninjured, but Mrs. Wooster's maid Leshawn—who knows all and tells all—reports that the arsonist is in the hospital with many broken bones. Are you familiar with *The Wind in the Willows* ?"

"Read it long ago."

"The chapter called 'The Wild Wood' gave me the idea. Well, unless you have added instructions, I must go and report the bomb to what passes for the law in this place. Then I will need a good long nap. Last night was anything but restful."

"Take care, Devi. There'll be more trouble when Marv comes home. Maybe even before."

Mr. Warlock rang off and sat thinking for a few minutes. Then he locked up his office, climbed into his big black Infiniti, and headed for I-10.

* * *

It was close to noon when Jeanne entered the library to find him seated in the leather chair where her husband had died, with Tim's favorite book open on his lap.

"Hi," she said. "Glad Leshawn let you in. Devi's wife arrived for a visit and I was showing her to the guest house. He told me we had some excitement here last night, which I, darn it, slept right through."

"That's why I decided to drive down and see you."

While Leshawn served coffee, they chatted casually. When she left the room, Mrs. Wooster lowered her voice and asked, "Any idea what Marv will try next?"

"As Charlie Chan used to say, two possibilities. One, he'll get scared and back off. Two, he'll totally ditch common sense and escalate."

"You expect escalation."

"Yes. And that means danger for you as well as Devi. I'd like to suggest you take a vacation. Ever seen the fjords of Norway? Great place to get away from the summer heat."

She sat and sipped and thought about it, already looking quite cool in her pale-hued summer clothes—silk blouse, linen slacks—with her brown hair neat in a short bob. Finally she set down her cup with a small but somehow decisive clink. "I think I'll stay, hot weather and all. I want to see what happens to Marv."

In the kitchen, Leshawn reported to her sister that Mrs. Wooster and a lawyer were sitting in the library, talking and laughing. Antwonet promptly relayed the information to Buck Soulé, who received it with perfect indifference. Yet within an hour he got a phone call from far away Hawaii that gave him a personal interest in Leshawn's employer and all her doings.

What happened was this: at about the time Mr. Warlock sat down in Mrs. Wooster's library, Sheriff Dutch Turpin rang Marv, using his personal phone because calls on his official phone were automatically monitored.

"I just got through talking to the immigrant from over at Miz Wooster's," he began. "He's an Indian, like Governor Jindal. Well, not like Jindal, because he ain't fool enough to run for president. He took me out to the woods by the Wooster spread and showed me something he found there."

"Yeah?" said Marv, his sleep-logged voice sounding postmortem. "What'd he find?"

"A home-made bomb built into a Chilly Willy meant for iced drinks. Fertilizer, accelerant, detonator, chunk of magnesium to make everything burn real hot. You know anything about that, Marv?"

"No. Complete surprise to me."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, because I was kind of thinking those jackleg mechanics you got working for you at the Car Barn mighta built it for you. You know what it made me think of?"

"What?"

"*Hate crime*. That's exactly what the FBI would call it, if the damn thing hadda blown up the guest house. Aimed at Devi Whatsisname. That ain't what it was, but that's what it woulda looked like, and that's two federal offenses in one, terrorism and hate crime. If the big boys git involved, Marv, they'll hang somebody's butt out to dry, and it won't be mine. You understand me?"

Receiving no answer, the sheriff snapped, "Well, speak up, I don't have all goddamn day. You understand me, or not?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, what?"

"Don't bully me."

"I'm the sheriff and I'll bully anybody I want to. That's my job. So, to repeat—yeah, what?"

"Yeah, I understand. No more bombs."

"Cousin Willard will be right glad to hear that, whenever he gits out the hospital. He's gone crazy—claims he was bit all over by little animals, his ears, his nose, his balls, his toes—yet there ain't no bite marks on him. Just abrasions, contusions, two black eyes, seven broken bones, and a bruised spleen from where the front wheel of a watermelon truck rolled over him. Better be real nice to him, Marv, pay his tab, give him a few thou for pain and suffering. Otherwise, who knows? He might start talking about who put him up to this asshole adventure he was on.

"Meanwhile, you have you a real nice vacation. And don't *never* cause me no trouble with the Feds because if you do, you gonna have something

land on top of you that's a lot heavier than a watermelon truck."

Dutch made his call at 12:05 P.M., CDT. That was 7:05 A.M. in Hawaii (summer hours) and Marv—grungy, sticky, smelly, and monumentally hung over—received it while sprawled on a waterbed at the Hot Lei Motel in beautiful downtown Pearl City. He thought of strangling the Filipina hooker breathing heavily beside him, just to relieve his feelings, but decided that would cause him even more trouble, which he didn't need.

What he needed was revenge. He covered his face with his pillow to shut out the painfully bright gleams of tropical sunlight that penetrated the dusty blinds and began thinking how to get it. The pillow smelled bad, too, so he threw it aside with a curse, reached again for his phone, and tapped in a 318 number. Hence the call Buck received, back in Tallulah Parish.

"I can't count on Dutch no more," Marv complained. "He just wants to take and take and not help me out at all. I never knew he was so dishonest. And I sure can't count on any of my other relatives. Willard screwed up bad, and he's one of the *smart* ones."

Marv then broached a new idea for the final solution of the Wooster problem. It was really just a notion, nothing firm or well worked out, and Buck received it with something between a grunt and a grumble.

For a long time he hadn't liked the way Marv treated him. Buck saw himself as a partner in the business, using his contacts with urban street gangs to obtain the vehicles the Car Barn's mechanics later disassembled in the quiet and safety of Tallulah Parish. Marv squared the sheriff, arranged the sale of cut-rate parts to crooked auto-repair shops throughout the South, and thought of himself as the boss. But as Buck pointed out, without no supply there wouldn't be no demand. He wanted the profits split evenly, but Marv refused, insisting that 60-40 was generous.

All this lay in the background as Buck growled, "I don't know 'bout this kidnap-and-ransom idea of yours. She's got her a guard, and if he's a PI, he most likely got a piece on him."

"So shoot him in the back. Or grab the Wooster bitch when she's on the road driving somewheres. Or whatever you think will work. For Chrissake, Buck, use your 'nitiative. You're there, I ain't."

"No, you off nice and safe in Aloha Land screwing dark pussy, and I'm here supposed to do the heavy lifting for you."

"How 'bout a third of whatever I get goes to you?"

"How 'bout half?"

"Key-rist, you ain't never satisfied. Okay, half. Does that motivate you enough? You feel like getting your goddamn back into this thing now?"

"Don't know yet, Marv, but I'm more interested than I was. Okay, I'll go over there tonight, check things out, maybe take care of the immigrant. That's half, now, right?"

"Right," said Marv, the grinding of his teeth clearly audible from six thousand miles away.

That afternoon, Devi and his wife Vedanta enjoyed a romantic interlude, followed by a siesta. At sundown they sat, lightly attired, in the parlor of the guest house, sipping cool mango drinks and dipping their fingers into a dish of gerbil food she'd brought from the city. The enticing odor of warming naan drifted in from the tiny kitchen. He wanted to talk about the case he was on, but Vedanta wanted to discuss Mrs. Wooster, who was younger and more attractive than she'd expected.

"Your employer seems pleasant, though somewhat fat," she mused. "What do you think of her?"

Devi replied cautiously, "She is a very kind, matronly lady. At times she reminds me of my mother."

"Oh, Devi, she isn't nearly that old."

"Perhaps not, but grief has aged her."

"Her husband was this Mr. Tim, who was killed by his terror of snakes? That sounds so odd to me. After all, Lord Krishna as an infant was shielded from the hot sun when a cobra opened its hood to protect him."

"Over here they believe in the Garden of Eden and don't like snakes. Jewish legends are peculiar at best."

Vedanta was about to say something more when Devi looked away and raised his left hand. She was too wise to ask what was wrong, for she knew he needed absolute quiet to receive whatever extrasensory message was reaching him. Something clearly was wrong, for he got up, dug into his suitcase, and took out his Glock. He even chambered a round—and that, in the American phrase, meant business.

He pointed at her, she nodded, and when he slipped through the door, she followed and turned the deadlock behind him. She considered dousing the lights, but then decided to let everything appear as normal as possible in case the house was being watched. She called Jeanne and told her, "There is someone bad outside. Are you prepared?"

"I locked up after Leshawn left and turned the security system on. But I think I'll get my shotgun, too. The ammo's only bird shot, but it hurts anyway."

So Mrs. Wooster was armed and ready, her security system had been alerted, and Devi was prowling the dusk, armed and ready, too. Vedanta said a brief prayer to Lord Krishna, fetched the loaf of naan, and sat quietly, eating warm bread and gerbil food and sipping her mango drink. This was exactly the way she'd always envisioned America, with crimes and guns and so forth. Why did people say that Hollywood misrepresented the country? Actually, the movies had given her quite a fair picture of what she'd be facing when she joined her husband in the Brave New World.

* * *

TALLULAH PARISH Regional Hospital and Wellness Center had only one small locked ward, usually monopolized by ODs and DTs—people who'd overdosed on drugs and/or drunk themselves into delirium tremens.

Willard Turpin had spent a night there, but after he stopped raving, he'd been moved and now lay quietly in the fracture ward while his broken bones knitted. So there was an empty bed available when Buck Soulé was wrestled in by some of his male relatives and put into restraints by the attendants.

The little hospital was getting crowded, for Devi was there also, receiving treatment for a gunshot wound. The resident on duty reported his case to the sheriff as required by law, and at twenty to twelve, Dutch Turpin—unhappy at being roused out of bed—arrived to interview Devi, only to find him sleeping under sedation.

Two women sat at his bedside, and the sheriff swept off his Stetson out of respect for Mrs. Wooster's money. "How's the boy doing?" he inquired sotto voce, and Jeanne replied coldly, "As well as possible, under the circumstances."

He nodded to Vedanta and invited Jeanne to step into the hallway with him. They sat down in plastic chairs while he fished out a small notebook and a ballpoint. "You'll need to give a formal statement tomorrow," he explained, "but maybe right now you can let me have real quick a general picture of what happened tonight out by your place."

Jeanne said she'd finished supper and was watching *Dancing with the Stars* when Vedanta called to warn her about an intruder. She'd just fetched her shotgun when all hell broke loose outside—screams, a fusillade of gunfire. She was standing by the front door, uncertain whether to go out or not, when the knocker rattled and she looked through the peephole and saw Devi covered with blood. She threw open the door and he stumbled into her arms.

"I was trying to hold him and the shotgun both when his wife arrived. Together we got him onto the sofa before he passed out. While I called 911, she swabbed up the blood with a towel and we saw that he had a scalp wound, a good bleeder but nothing fatal. The ambulance pulled up and the EMTs put a pressure pack on Devi's head, strapped him to a gurney, and took off for the hospital. I followed in my car with Vedanta."

"So, Miz Wooster, what do you think happened out there in the woods in the dark?"

"Buck was trespassing on my property when something sent him into a panic of fear. He started shooting at random and happened to hit Devi. If I were you," she added, "I'd have Buck tested for crack and meth. Both."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm on to that," he said in a tone of mild reproof. "Now would you like to watch the patient while I talk to his wife?"

Later, Dutch also spoke to the young resident who'd admitted Buck and found him a bit shaken by the experience.

"I'm a kidney man, myself," he explained. "Kidneys are nice quiet organs, at least compared to the brain. Even after we got Mr. Soulé strapped down, he kept on screaming and trying to break the restraints—they're thick canvas webbing, but for a minute I thought he might actually do it. He was yelling about these monsters that were after him, things with horns and claws and big yellow eyes. The worst was feathered like an eagle and it kept slashing at him with its big hooked beak. It tore a strip of skin off the back of his neck and ripped it down his whole spine as far as his coccyx—his tailbone. I've seen a lot of meth cases and sometimes they're pretty frantic, but I never saw one this bad."

"So, did he have his back skint?"

"No. The pain was real enough, but it was psychogenic. Something had stimulated the pain centers in his brain. He has some physical injuries, too—he fell over logs and ran into trees at high speed, and his face is swollen and he has cuts and bruises and some knocked-out teeth and sprains and whatnot,

but that's all. We'll have to wait for the tox results to see what he was on, but whatever, it was strong stuff."

Back in his office—by now it was nearly one A.M., but officers of the law are on duty 24-7, as Dutch often liked to point out—he put in another call to Hawaii. There it was eight P.M., so early that Marv hadn't even had time to get seriously drunk.

"Your man Buck," said the sheriff without preliminary greeting, "is in the hospital, and when he gits out he'll be leaving this parish forever. If he didn't know so goddamn many secrets, he'd be under arrest right this minute as a convicted felon in possession of a firearm.

"Oh, by the way, he shot the immigrant, too. Probably by accident, but that could still be serious, because Buck was engaged in a criminal enterprise at the time or I miss my guess. If I wanted to, I could build up quite a case against him. As it is, he's going away, and when you get back, I think you better pack up and do the same."

"Dutch, all the money I give you—"

"You ain't never given me no money. I'll testify to that in front of any court in the land. All you ever give me was the quadruple red-ass, but you ain't gonna give me no pain in no ass no more."

Twenty minutes later, Dutch crept into bed beside his wife. She was still awake, reading *People* magazine and waiting to ask him what had taken him back to the office so late. Under her expert grilling, he soon divulged a summary account.

"You stay away from them Turpins," she commanded. "They ain't never been any good. Whatever Buck was doing at the Woosters, you know Marv put him up to it."

"The Turpins are my fambly," he protested.

"Don't brag about it," she said, turned her back, and put out the light.

* * *

"You were right," admitted Mr. Warlock, "and I was wrong."

The late-afternoon sunlight pouring into the library was so intense that Jeanne had pulled down the roller blinds. She and Mr. Warlock were both sipping iced tea. From time to time his gaze drifted to a children's book lying

open on his lap. It was called *Where the Wild Things Are* . Pictured on the open pages were all the monsters that Buck believed had attacked him in the dark. Devi, he surmised, must have been reading it and the images had stayed with him.

Well, he wouldn't be getting inside other people's heads for a while, because this time Buck had gotten into his. Devi had a crease gouged in his skull, a concussion, and when he woke would have a headache of migraine proportions. Right now, with Vedanta at his side, he was drifting on a warm sea of love and painkillers, unavailable just as things were moving to a climax.

At this point, Jeanne broke into his thoughts, asking, "What were you wrong about?"

"I thought we could scare Marv off. But things haven't worked out that way. You remember what you asked me to do at our first meeting?"

She reflected. "Yes. I asked you to kill him. Are you going to do it now?"

"Don't seem to have much choice, do I? The man's obsessed."

"Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if, years ago, Tim had just caved in and paid him what he wanted."

"Marv would have taken the money, set off on a long trip, and while he was away somebody would have shot your husband from ambush. A tiny fraction of Tim's money would have gone to pay the shooter."

"O brave new world, that has such people in it," she murmured.

"I'm getting to know Marv. He has a mind like a ribbon, a mile long but only half an inch wide. Tunnel vision doesn't begin to describe it. Look, can you put me up for a night or two? I don't think you should be alone until this is settled."

"Certainly. I'll ask Leshawn to make up a bed in one of the spare rooms. I notice," she added dryly, "that you don't want me to go to Norway anymore."

"No, you have to stay here, Jeanne, because—"

"I'm the bait," she said, suddenly serious.

"Yes. He's probably given up on the money, but he wants revenge more than ever. For what, I'm not sure. Maybe because he's had to give up on the money. Now he wants you dead, and you might as well know it. You're not the sort I have to hide things from."

When Leshawn found Mr. Warlock moving in, her cup of gossip ranneth over. In one spectacular twenty-four-hour period, Antwonet's man Buck had gone crazy, the immigrant Devi had been shot, and Mrs. Wooster was taking a

lover. She could ask the Lord for no more than that, and soon the exciting news reached the remotest borders of Tallulah Parish, where not many people watched CNN because not many needed to.

About eleven that night, Jeanne looked in on William—she didn't remember when they'd started using first names, it just seemed to happen by itself—to see if he was comfortable. He was sitting up in bed, reading *Treasure Island*. He said he was just fine, and by the way, he'd brought a flask of some really good brandy with him. Would she join him for a nightcap?

Nodding, she sat down in a comfortable chair and watched him get up to fetch the brandy. His blue pajamas with red piping made her think of Tim, the only other man she'd ever known who got dressed up to go to bed—her father, her brothers, and her first husband all had slept in their underwear, if that.

William fetched glasses from his bathroom and poured a finger for her and one for himself from a silver flask. He sat on the edge of the bed, sipping his drink, while she glanced at the book he'd laid on the bedside table. It was open at one of Wyeth's illustrations.

"Oh, dear," she murmured. "Blind Pew's about to get trampled to death. Serves him right, but still pretty awful.... Is that how you're going to kill Marv?"

"He isn't blind, and I don't have any horses handy to trample him with. But I'll think of something."

"Oh, I'm sure you will." They chatted for a few more minutes, picking topics randomly, while her feelings bounced back and forth between *I do like this man* and *He scares me*. Devi had been quite strange enough, and he only worked for William.

They downed their drinks and she got up to go. Walking her to the door, he put his right hand on her shoulder—gently, just resting it—and when she didn't pull away, he put his left hand on the other shoulder and used a very soft, suggestive pressure to turn her face toward him. Ah, proximity, proximity! It had been such a long time, and she really needed a man. William wore a clean-smelling aftershave, and she was conscious of the icy scent enfolding a big body that radiated heat.

Absently, as if thinking of other things, she began to open his pajama jacket, one button, two buttons, three buttons. She spread the broadcloth, revealing a mat of dark hair that covered the middle of his chest, except for a

geometrical mark over the breastbone. At first she thought it was a tattoo, and felt surprise that a suave attorney would have himself decorated like a UFC boxer.

Except it wasn't a tattoo—the hair didn't grow through it. A raised scar, then? No, it was the wrong color, red-purple, definitely a birthmark. William Warlock, or whatever his real name might be, had been born with it. And a man born with a pentagram on his chest wasn't somebody she'd go to bed with just like *that*.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, pushing him away. "I'm sorry, William, this isn't something I can handle. Good night."

With a movement as supple as an escaping serpent, she was through the door in an instant and it closed behind her without a sound. He sighed, climbed back into bed, and picked up *Treasure Island* again. Blind Pew was still standing in the moonlit road, but as he gazed at the painted image it began to move, the blind man turning desperately from side to side, while his cries of despair and the thunder of galloping hooves filled Warlock's inner ears.

"Good," he muttered and turned off the light. Next morning he'd call a friend at Troop W, a former client he'd helped to defeat a politically inspired malfeasance charge—pro bono at that, because honest cops didn't make much money. The lieutenant owed him one, and it was time to collect.

At breakfast, he and Jeanne said a cool good morning, like the platonic housemates they were. Leshawn served them, listening, observing, storing up any hints that might reveal the exact state of affairs. Had they done it last night, or hadn't they? But they merely ate their melon slices, poached eggs, and toast while making pointless remarks about the weather. She got the first reportable item of gossip when she poured the lawyer his second cup of coffee.

"The sheriff's about to get some bad news," he remarked. "The state cops have received a tip about the Car Barn. They'll have to secure a search warrant, but that won't give him more than twenty-four hours' leeway. I wonder if Buck Soulé's still in the psycho ward. If so, there's a lot he can tell the troopers. Maybe they should interview him while he's under lock and key."

That was enough for Leshawn. She was in the kitchen and on to Antwonet's cell phone before William's cup was empty.

* * *

A HOT, CLOSE EVENING had arrived when Marv exited Louis Armstrong International Airport after a wearisome ten-hour journey from Honolulu, via LAX and DFW—really fourteen hours, counting time lost in the terminals. He was hungry, constipated, sticky in the armpits, and filled with a lust for revenge on the universe.

He picked up his car in long-term parking and headed west on I-10. The evening rush was in full swing, and perforce he endured the roar of the freeway and the impaction of hot metal at Baton Rouge, where two interstates met, or rather collided. He crossed the Mississippi, driving straight into a ferocious sunset, and later turned north on I-49. He put the pedal to the metal until he reached the LA 666 exit, where a sign punctured by rifle fire welcomed him to Tallulah Parish.

All the way from Honolulu he'd been working the phones, but without result. Getting out of the parish while Willard planted the bomb had felt like a good idea at the time, but in his absence every damn thing had gotten screwed up. First Willard had failed him, and then out of a clear blue sky Dutch had started talking like a *lawman*, for Christ's sake. And he couldn't raise Buck, just kept getting his goddamn mailbox. *Do I*, he asked Fate, *have to take care of everything myself?*

He was still awaiting an answer when his phone played the opening bars of "Great Balls of Fire" and a Cajun voice brusquely summoned him to the sheriff's office tout de suite. There the Naugahyde armchair where Marv usually sat was occupied by a 220-pound deputy named Ledoux. In his brown uniform and shoulder holster he looked like a large and lethal Irish potato, though he wasn't Irish and hailed from some little coon-ass settlement south of Alexandria. Clearly, he was there to witness the proceedings and remember exactly what the sheriff wanted him to remember, and nothing else.

With Marv standing before the big desk like a schoolboy facing the principal, Dutch intoned, "Mr. Turpin, today I got a call from Troop W Headquarters. They have received a tip from a usually reliable source that you are running some kind of illegal operation at the Car Barn, and they're coming over tomorrow with a warrant to check it out.

"I would hate to think," he continued, raising his right hand palm out, like a cop halting traffic, to shut off any protests, "that a local businessman who I have always believed to be totally straight would engage in a prohibited endeavor of whatsoever kind. But I feel it is my duty to give you fair warning that our fambly relationship will not save you if the troopers find anything illegal when they enter the Barn. We are all equal before the law, and that includes the Turpin fambly. It includes me, and it sure as hell includes you.

"Did I ask for a comment? No, I did not. So good-bye, and for your own sake, Mr. Turpin, I hope that I never lay eyes on you again in this life or any other. Because then I will have to act totally in my official capacity, and you know what that means."

In case Marv was too dumb to get the message, Deputy Ledoux accompanied him to the front door of the Headquarters building. There he tapped Marv's chest with a finger as fat and brown as the Cajun sausage called *boudin*, though *boudin* was softer and lacked a nail. "You," he said, "clear alla you shit outa da Barn tonight, you hear? You git ridda da evidence, or next time you come here, you comin' in troo da back."

The back end of the building contained the jail, widely viewed as a kind of roach motel for humans—easy to enter, impossible to exit alive. Marv was sitting in his car brooding about the threat and trying to get his head together when "Great Balls of Fire" played again. Buck's gravelly voice announced that he was back in touch.

Marv snapped, "Where the fuck you been?" Buck replied with his own string of f-words, conveying the information that working with Marv was the worst move he'd ever made in a lifetime of bad moves.

"I'm in Antwonet's car wearing a paper nightgown without nothing to cover my bare tail, and if they hadn't moved me out the fruitcake ward this afternoon, she couldn't a got to me and I wouldn't be sitting here using her Bluetooth. Now she tells me the state cops are gonna land on us like a thousand-pound canary, and—"

"Will you shut up? I got things to say."

"Shut up your own self. Look to me like on account of you and your big thing with the Woosters, we both headed for the Farm. And if I go, you go, unnerstand? Ain't no fun up there for a black man, but it's worse for a white one, because at the Farm yawl are the abused minority, and I do mean abused."

The Farm meant Angola, and just mentioning the dread name seemed to clear the air. Marv sounded almost rational as he said, "Buck, the troopers are coming to the Car Barn and we got to move the merchandise out tonight. Tomorrow's too late. Put some clothes on and I'll call the other guys and meet you there. I hate to say this, but we got to load up everything and dump it in Red River. Ain't no help for it."

Buck groaned. "It was such a sweet racket," he said bitterly, "until you screwed it up."

Transporting heavy objects had been part of the Barn's regular business, so Marv owned several trucks, including a dump truck with DELTA CONSTRUCTION LLC stenciled on the doors, and a tie-down tarp for concealing the cargo. His two mechanics showed up grumbling, and the four of them grunted, sweat, and cursed the dark hours away, loading the truck with the insides of a Lexus, a Jag, and a Cad. Also hundreds of rusting license plates that would have given the state cops a virtual roadmap to car thefts and carjackings over the last five years. Luckily, tires in good condition had already been sent to a dealer to be resold as new, while the autos' bodies had been consigned to a junkyard run by Cousin Huey Turpin to be crumpled into anonymous steel bundles and sold for scrap.

At three-twenty in the morning, the final journey began. Buck climbed behind the truck's wheel while Marv paid off the mechanics with practically his last folding money. Then he uncapped a gas can, spread its contents around, tossed a match, and sprinted through the door, followed by a blast of hot wind. The Barn was a wooden structure impregnated with carbon-based fluids, and he felt pretty sure it would burn so hot that anything left in it would be incinerated. He would have loved to leave Jeanne Wooster in there, too—but no, one thing at a time, he'd get around to her later.

Marv joined Buck in the cab. Both were weary unto death, both smelled like the aftermath of an industrial accident, and both were suffering from what Dutch would have diagnosed as the quadruple red-ass. Marv's wallet was empty, his livelihood destroyed, his future in doubt. Naturally, he wouldn't have dreamed of blaming himself.

"It's that Wooster bitch," he mumbled over and over, and Buck growled, "You on that again?"

A pale, swollen moon hung in the sky. Impenetrably dark woods crowded close to the road, and legions of frogs chanted like a Greek chorus. Their route was a slow, grinding journey up and down the rolling countryside of

piney-woods Louisiana to the Red River—a little Mississippi, whose color came from its eroded clay banks and whose silt-laden water and bed of oozy mud promised lasting concealment for the stolen goods.

After an hour, Buck turned off the blacktop and followed a dirt road winding through the pines to a bluff that was used by locals to dump everything from plastic containers to the inedible portions of deer carcasses. While Buck backed cautiously to the edge, Marv exited the truck and stood waving a flashlight and cursing under his breath. He'd doused himself with a repellent called Bug-Out, but the mosquitoes were like kamikazes, diving into the poison and biting until they died, so many millions of them that his face and arms felt scorched as if by flames.

"Hold it, hold it, goddamn you, right there, hold it!" he shouted.

Buck pulled the squealing hand brake, exited the cab, and began working loose the knots tying down the tarp. Marv helped by continuing to wave the light and berate him. "Move it, move it! You wanna keep me here getting eaten alive all night? Typical goddamn black—faster'n a rock, slower'n a vine."

Buck said nothing, but his throat vibrated with a deep inward growl as he took a grip on the rusty lever that controlled the dumping mechanism and forced it to the right. Slowly the back of the truck gnashed and squealed its way upward, while a hideous metallic grating began as the cargo slid down the slanting steel bed. Amid the nerve-grinding noise, Buck stood brooding, his thoughts darker than the bug-haunted night. Maybe demons still lingered in the depths of his soul. Maybe, like Marv, he wanted revenge on the universe. Whatever, a pounding like horses' hooves started in his skull, its thunder growing louder, faster, and more furious. And then like red lightning came a flare of blind rage at—well, at everything. But especially at Marv Turpin.

He snatched the flashlight away, hit his partner over the head with it, and pushed him off the bluff. When Marv landed with a great splash in the moonlit eddies twenty feet below, Buck stepped to the edge and played the light down. He watched the Caddy engine land on Marv, followed by the drive shaft, followed by the innards of the Jag and Lexus, followed by a barrage of license plates, followed by a landslide of random offal as the steel cascade set the whole trash dump sliding. Dozens of squeaking rats fell into the drink and began swimming to safety.

"Rest in pieces, motherfucker," growled Buck, by way of epitaph.

Slowly and painfully, like an aged man, he lowered the back of the truck, secured it, and hauled himself into the cab. He released the hand brake, shifted, and tromped on the gas pedal. He could think of nothing but getting home to Antwonet's little house, to shower, sleep, and try to forget the worst thirty-six hours of his life. Tomorrow he'd tell her they were going away, far, far away, and they'd be using her car to get there. If the bitch knew what was good for her, she wouldn't make no trouble about it, neither.

In his exhaustion, Buck failed to notice a tall man with a pale, craggy face standing in the shadows of the pines, looking on but doing nothing, since nothing more needed to be done. William Warlock had just lived up to his adopted name.

* * *

With Buck and Marv both absent, Tallulah Parish soon returned to its customary condition of rural doldrums enlivened by rare gossip-worthy events.

From time to time meth labs exploded, as they were apt to do. State troopers put out an APB on the missing men, and Leshawn spent a long day at Troop W Headquarters trying to convince them that she, who knew all and told all, really and truly had no idea where Buck and Antwonet had run off to. When the steamy summer gave way to the cool fall, political litterbugs speckled the parish with posters for Dutch Turpin, who—running as usual on a strong law-and-order platform—was triumphantly reelected sheriff.

By then Jeanne Wooster was no longer a parish resident. She'd sold her house, moved to New Orleans, and with William had purchased an apartment in a rambling brick building uptown. St. Eulalie's had gone through many changes in its hundred and fifty years—had first been a convent; then, after the nuns died out, a vanity acquisition for a famous vampire novelist; finally, a condo welcoming buyers who could shell out .5 to 5.5M for an apartment, depending on its size and the number of "features" it contained, such as altars, stained-glass windows, and mosaic floors.

Their apartment was toward the low end, cost-wise, yet boasted a deconsecrated chapel to the Virgin, where William placed a bronze copy of the famous Dancing Satyr of Pompeii. When Jeanne raised her eyebrows at

that, he explained that the old gods were the ones who spoke most clearly to him. He added that the only part of the Bible he found interesting was a verse warning the unjust that "some spirits there be, created for vengeance, who in their fury lay on sore strokes."

Slowly they were getting to know each other. He told her his original name, and she agreed that he'd been wise to change it. (Milton Meek did *not fit* him.) She told him about her troubled childhood, her first husband who used to beat her, and the immense relief she felt in settling down with Tim Wooster, who had his flaws but was a gentleman and, even better, a gentle man. "Still," she added, stroking William's head, "he was a bit dull. I guess I just like stronger meat."

During this conversation they were in bed, both their bodies suffused by the afterglow of mature but still vigorous lovemaking. She noticed—with astonishment, considering what had gone before—that William was almost ready to try again. Well, she wasn't, and gently but firmly she let him know it.

"Think you're a real devil, don't you?" she teased, and then, resting her cheek in the fur on his chest, fell sound asleep.

The Toymaker's Daughter

By Arundhati Hazra | 4986 words

Arundhati Hazra lives in Kolkata, India, and writes non-fiction for newspapers like The Hindu. Her debut story for F&SF is a deft fairy tale.

THERE IS A VILLAGE IN THE foothills of the Himalayas, among a cluster of villages that you will find on no map. It is a place you stumble into after a long day's trek, when your legs become sandbags and your lungs feel thicker than clotted cream. You stop at the village and are plied with *pakor*s and *masala chai* and queries about life in the city. You are given the fifteen-minute biographies of Chandru, who works in a cinema hall in Delhi; of Kuku, who is a driver for a "very big businessman" in Chandigarh; of Lucky and Sikky, who are going to become stars in Bollywood. You return home with messages for the aforementioned persons and a dozen others, a camera full of photos of grinning people standing straight as ramrods, and an invitation to surely attend the shepherd's daughter's wedding next month.

Had you stayed, and walked down the village's only road, you would have come across a little girl sitting on a porch, blowing on a flute whittled from mountain bamboo. She puffs into it in fits and starts and a reedy gasp trickles out, like the whistle of a train suffering from asthma. Panting for breath, she turns and looks into the shop, where her father is working on a block of wood with a chisel. The girl watches in wonder as the misshapen block acquires a hemispherical bulge with four stumps below it. The left side is flattened into a nearly triangular shape flanked by two big flaps, which tapers to a long, pendulous protuberance. The girl imagines the elephant stomping around her father's shop, searching for the bananas she has hidden under a bale of straw.

"I want to make elephants, too, *Baba* ," she says. "Elephants and lions and horses and cows and ducks and swans. I want to make a swan, *Baba* . Will you teach me how to make a swan?"

"Girls are not meant to work with tools," says her father, putting down the fist-sized elephant and wiping his hands on a dirty cloth. "Your fingers are small and delicate, and I don't want you hurting yourself playing with a man's instruments. Why don't you bring out your box of colors and paint this little chap? You have a deft and steady hand, and the gift of bringing out the colors in the figures I make."

The girl's face falls, but she walks over to her father and picks up the elephant. She strokes its trunk with her index finger, and it stares back at her with sightless eyes. Her box of paints is on her father's workbench; she fetches it and hunts for her palette, which has fallen under the bench. With her brushes and a tumbler of water, she goes out onto the porch again to make the best use of the fading sunlight.

The girl loves to read. The previous year, a missionary had donated his collection of books to the village school, which hired the girl's father to build some bookshelves to house them. Payment was a couple of hundred rupees, plus a waiver of the monthly library fee of five rupees for both the girl and her father. Most of the books were on philosophy and religion and other such adult subjects, but the girl did find a few fairy tales and children's books, which she devoured like a mongoose swallowing a rat snake. Soon she had finished the stories in the books and was spinning tales of her own, stories of princes meeting their beloveds, of young men performing valiant deeds, of talking cats and dancing rats and nightingales in the moonlight.

"Have you heard the story of the rat and the elephant?" she asks, mixing brown and white paints to create a bronze shade. "You haven't? Let me tell you. There was once an elephant named Shukram, who was the Chief Elephant of the King of Kolistan. Shukram was loved by everyone—by the stable hands who gave him the plumpest bananas, by the young princes and princesses who loved to slide down his trunk, and by the people of the kingdom, who showered rose petals on him during the royal processions. And they had good reason to love him, for he had a big and kind heart and helped everyone in any way he could.

"One day, when Shukram was taking the princes out for a ride, he saw a mangy cur chasing a tiny rat. The rat was running as fast as its tiny legs allowed, but the bigger and stronger dog was gaining on it. The rat ran up to Shukram, hid behind his foreleg, and squeaked, 'Help me! This dog is going to eat me. Please help me, Mr. Elephant.' Shukram took pity on the little creature and raised his trunk and trumpeted loudly. The dog was scared by

the sight of the huge elephant and ran away. The rat bowed to Shukram and thanked him. 'If you ever need help,' the rat said, 'remember this little friend of yours and he will come to your aid.' Shukram wondered what assistance this small animal could possibly give him, but thanked him for his offer and went on his way.

"Time passed and Shukram grew old. Another elephant was made the Chief Elephant, and when Shukram expressed a desire to return to the forests of his birth, it was readily granted. So he went to live in the jungles, eating leaves from the trees and roaming the forests looking for a herd to join.

"One day, he fell into a pit made by a hunter to catch wild elephants and twisted his foot very badly. He cried out and thrashed around but couldn't free himself. Dejected, he sat down and said aloud, 'Oh, what a horrible way to die, stuck in a trap waiting for the hunter's arrow! The rat I once saved asked me to remember him when I needed help, but how will I ever get word to him that I am in trouble?' Saying this, he closed his eyes and waited for death to arrive.

"After a while, he heard a lot of squeaking. Opening his eyes, he saw a horde of mice scampering around. He looked on in surprise as they gathered grass and twigs and leaves and bound them together. After a few hours of hard work, they had a strong rope, one end of which they tied to a tree trunk and the other they threw down to him. Some of them scampered into the pit to push him up while others tugged at the rope from above, and after a lot of huffing and puffing and heaving and pulling, they managed to drag him out of the pit.

"As soon as he was free, Shukram turned to the swarm of mice before him. 'How can I thank you enough?' he asked. 'You saved my life today.' One of the mice stepped forward and said, 'We are merely repaying our debt. You helped our brother in his time of great need, and it is only fair that we help you in yours.' It was then that Shukram learned that the rat he had saved was the nephew of the King of Rats, who had spread word of his good deed to all his brethren. A passing mouse had heard Shukram's cry for help and realized who he was, and gathered all the mice in the forest to save him.

"And so," says the little girl, putting down her brushes, for the sun has set beyond the mountains and her father is calling her to come in for her supper, "that is the story of the rat and the elephant. I will name you Shukram, so that you can be kind and big-hearted like the elephant in the story."

Every day, the girl's father gives shape to a new toy and the girl gives color to it. She makes up new stories for each of them, some drawn from the books she has read and others from her imagination. A shepherd plays his flute and causes a fairy to fall in love with him; a soldier rescues a princess from the castle where she is imprisoned; a cat uses its brains to help its master become king; and a lion and a rabbit become friends. She never writes any of the stories down, but they remain in her memory, fresh as the first lily in spring.

Once a month, a man comes from Shimla to buy the toymaker's wares. He pays twenty rupees for the smaller toys, forty for the bigger ones. He also brings chocolates and sweets for the girl, and sometimes new paints or a book. The girl looks forward to his visits, for he is always willing to listen to her stories, unlike her father, who usually tells her to run away and pester someone else. He tells her stories, too, stories about the quirky people who visit his shop, which she later weaves into the tales she creates.

"Your daughter is very imaginative," the man tells the toymaker. "You should think about sending her to a good school, maybe somewhere in Hamirpur or Kasauli. I fear her talents are being wasted in your village school."

"Where will I get the money?" asks the girl's father. "Most of my money goes to repay the loans I took out during my wife's illness, and what is left over is barely enough to give my daughter a decent life here. And there is also her wedding to save for. I cannot afford to move to the city."

The man tries his best to convince him, but it is a futile attempt. He gathers up the toys and pays the toymaker, bids adieu to the girl, and gets on the next bus to Shimla.

The man is the owner of a handicrafts store in Shimla—Puri and Son's Handicraft Emporium on Mall Road. He is the only member of the third generation of Puris to run the shop—his brother is a bank manager in Manali and his paternal cousin has a restaurant in Patiala. Mr. Puri is an engineer by education, but he loved the dimly lit confines of his family shop better than the dimly lit corridors of the government-run power plant he worked in, so he left his cushy Delhi job to sell pashmina shawls and bamboo baskets to tourists and collectors.

The toys are popular with the shoppers; the intricate woodwork and sophisticated craftsmanship appeal to the collectors, while the bright colors attract children. Some of the government handicraft shops in other cities buy

from him, as do big-name lifestyle stores in Delhi and Mumbai. He knows that some of them sell his products at huge markups, the profits from which never trickle down to him, but he doesn't mind. His is a business of passion, not profits.

A young girl in Bangalore receives some of his toys from an aunt who visits Shimla on a vacation. Bored of her plastic Barbies with their cookie-cutter expressions, the girl creates some space for the new arrivals—a crocodile whose open jaws reveal a trapped fish; a menagerie consisting of a lion, two baboons, a fox, four rabbits, a billy goat, and a pair of lovebirds; and three zookeepers to watch over the animals.

"What do I name you two?" she asks, picking up the lovebirds. "How about Romeo and Juliet?" She knows nothing about Shakespeare's most famous creations, but enough hours in front of the television watching the latest (and crappiest) Hindi movies have given her the inkling that they have something to do with romance.

"Actually, our names are Ashfaq and Meera."

The girl drops the birds in shock, but they land on the fluffy carpet and thus do not break.

"You can speak?" she asks in wonder.

"Apparently, yes." The bird sounds surprised as well.

The girl picks up the lion and the fox. "Can you guys talk, too?"

"Yes," replies the fox, "and I would much prefer it if you could keep the lion away from me. I don't want to be eaten."

"MOM! DAD!" The girl's shouts bring her parents running. "Mom, Dad, these toys can speak!"

The parents look at one another. "Yes, I'm sure they can, dear," says her mother. "What do they say?"

"These lovebirds said that their names are Ashfaq and Meera," says the girl. She turns to the birds. "Tell her."

The parents smile indulgently.

"My name is Ashfaq and hers is Meera."

The parents' eyes are round as saucers.

"Sheila didn't mention that she bought talking toys. They must have cost her a fortune."

"Tell me something else," says the girl, "something about yourselves."

"We are lovebirds in both the literal and figurative senses. We—"

"Good lord!" exclaims the father. "It has speech-recognition and natural-language-processing software. What is it?"

"We are not 'its,'" says the bird, causing the mother to collapse into a chair in shock. "I was once the prince of Dewaldesh. I was supposed to marry the princess of the neighboring land of Pahargarh, to cement the alliance between our two nations. But a week before the wedding, I met Meera. She had come to the palace of the King of Pahargarh to sell garlands and I fell in love with her. I slipped out of the castle to meet her and followed her to her hovel. I met her in the guise of a poor carpenter and she fell in love with me as well. On the day of my wedding, I revealed my true self to her, and brought her to my palace and declared my intention to marry her. The King of Pahargarh was furious and demanded my incarceration, and my father was powerless to protect us. It was then that my grandmother, who had magical powers, turned us both into lovebirds so that we could fly away to be together."

There is pin-drop silence after the bird's story. After what feels like hours, the father seizes the toys and locks himself in his study with his laptop and mobile phone for company.

The news channels are soon buzzing with reports of the toys that can talk. There are numerous interviews and discussions and everyone—from toy-company executives to voice-recognition scientists to armchair experts—has a theory, but none of them can be confirmed. A number of toys are dissected, but no source of intelligence can be found. Investigative reporters arrive at Mr. Puri's shop and bombard him with questions, and the poor man, unaccustomed to dealing with the media, is bulldozed into revealing his source. From then on, it is a mad rush to the top of the mountain.

One morning, the villagers of the small, nameless village wake up to a trail of jeeps panting up the steep slopes. A vehicle is a rarity in these areas, seven much more so; long-faced men stop to gawk at them, while ruddy-cheeked women and bright-eyed children peek out of windows and doors.

The girl is sitting at the table eating her breakfast of rice porridge with yak milk before she goes to school. Her father is in the other room and does not hear the first knock on the door, but he soon hurries out when the hammering becomes insistent. He throws a reassuring look at his worried daughter before opening the door. And is nearly blinded by the flashing cameras accompanying the microphones thrust into his face.

Within the hour, reporters have taken up every inch of the small house. Father and daughter sit on a cot in the center of the room, and cameramen form a defensive ring around them. The girl clutches at her father, refusing all the biscuits and chocolates offered by the intruders. The toymaker looks befuddled as the reporters hold out the toys he has made and quiz him about their creation.

"I just carve them out of wood and my daughter paints them."

"How do you imbue them with speech?"

"I don't understand what you are referring to."

"What wood do you use?"

"Usually pine or deodar. The woodcutter supplies the wood."

"And how do you get them to speak? What voice-recognition and speech-processing software do you use?"

The journalists question him until a trickle of sweat begins to run down his forehead. The girl is quiet throughout, holding on to her father like a drowning man clutching a lifeguard. Some reporters ask her a few questions, but most, seeing her fearful face and her trembling figure, take pity on her and leave her alone. She notices some of the men put a few toys into their pockets as they search the shop but is powerless to protest. She whimpers as a boot crushes a pheasant chick she painted the previous night and fancies that she hears the cry of the chick as well.

A couple of hours later, the house is empty. There was barely anything to film in the small, sparsely furnished dwelling; the reporters thought the toymaker was either a simpleton or a master strategist, and retreated to figure out their next moves. A couple of them inserted hundred-rupee notes and visiting cards into the toymaker's hands, while others turned their cameras on the villagers, who looked even more clueless than the toymaker himself. The girl walks through the ruin the reporters have left in their wake and takes in the overturned workbench and the wood supplies strewn all around, her spilled paints creating a mishmash on the shop floor.

Over the next few weeks, the girl's life is turned inside out. A man from Delhi offers to become their agent and "handle everything the right way, so you don't need to worry at all." He whisks them off to Delhi, to the home of a millionaire toy manufacturer who allots them a corner of his factory, a workspace larger than their village. At first, the toymaker has no idea what to do, but his daughter brings out a toy kitten, one of a handful of carvings she managed to salvage from their shop back home. She picks up a brush, dips it

into a bottle of white paint, and begins her work on the kitten, telling it the tale of a cat with a huge smile. Following his daughter's lead, the toymaker begins carving, making kings and queens and wizards and their horses and lions and tigers into which his daughter paints life. He is asked to sign a few documents and affixes his thumbprint on them, not understanding the lawyer's convoluted explanations. He is a woodworker, his work is to do with wood and chisels and hammers and saws; he doesn't care about anything else.

The toy manufacturer shelves his plans to create a new range of designer dolls and launches a publicity blitz for the wooden novelties he has named the "Magic Collection." Soon, there are snaking queues of people waiting outside stores to buy the handmade creations, and the manufacturer pushes the toymaker and his daughter to create more of them, and faster. The girl is taken out of school and given private tutors so that she can devote maximum time to painting the toys. She is supplied with scripts of stories she is to tell the toys and scolded when she goes off-script. A couple of Hollywood movie studios hear of the girl's talents and rush to collaborate with the manufacturer. The toymaker is asked to create a line of superhero toys, and the girl finds herself repeating the same story day after day to a bunch of costumed figurines.

Every morning, Mahesh Yadav pops a handful of breath mints into his mouth before he reports to work. His head throbs with a hangover as he drives the car from his employer's posh South Delhi home to the kid's school, and the loud Hindi music that the kid demands he put on doesn't help much. One chilly winter morning, his eyes droop as he dreams of hot *pakor*as and a glass of whiskey, and thus doesn't see the thin man crossing the street.

The toymaker is taken to the hospital, where the doctors try to stem the flow of blood. Yadav's employer, a prominent textile mill owner who rushed to the hospital on hearing the news, tries to comfort the toymaker's daughter and offers to pay for her father's treatment. The girl just stares hollowly at the whitewashed walls. The mill owner is keen to avoid any negative publicity and requests a favor from the toy manufacturer, who had accompanied the girl to the hospital. The two businessmen reach an agreement just as the doctor exits the emergency ward to inform them that they should make arrangements for the funeral.

The toy manufacturer gives the girl a month to grieve. He hires counselors to help her open up, but she doesn't speak a word. Her tutors try to engage her in studies, but she stares blankly at the board. She is taken to the workshop and given toys and paints to work with, but they lie untouched.

One month turns into three, and she still has spoken not a word. The toy manufacturer threatens to throw her out on the street, but she is unresponsive. Journalists give up on the story of the talking toys; a beak-nosed boy has been born in Bhatinda and crowds throng the hospital, believing him to be an avatar of Garuda, the eagle mount of the god Vishnu.

I meet the girl on my second reporting assignment. I moved from Mumbai to Delhi a month ago, accompanied by a volley of tantrums from my son, who is furious at having to find a new set of friends to play cricket with. My wife also misses the weekly beach hangouts with her college gang and is unhappy with the "phony wannabe" neighbors she now has to put up with. My home has become a battlefield; I take refuge in reportage and follow the story of the magical village girl.

I meet her in a crowded tenement which houses many other workers from the toy factory. Her caretaker, a middle-aged mother of three, says that the factory's manager called her husband, the leader of the workers' union, gave him some money, and dumped the child on him. The toy manufacturer's men visited occasionally to cajole and bully the girl to work again, but they haven't come around for a month. And now the allowance for the girl's upkeep has stopped.

The girl sits on the bed in a corner of the room. The bedsheet is grimy, the coverlet spotted with curry stains. Beside the bed, a small table holds wooden figurines and art supplies, all covered with thick layers of dust. The girl does not look at me when I enter; nor does she respond to my questions. I had seen a few pictures of her, holding on to her father's arm, glancing uncertainly at the camera. She looked like a spirit then; she is even more wraithlike now.

I ask the caretaker if she has any objections to my taking the girl away. She shrugs—looking after the girl brings her no benefit, and the child's ghostly demeanor unsettles her. I give her my address, in case the toy manufacturer wants to contact the girl, and lead her from the house. She does not object, and sits quietly beside me in my car, staring straight ahead.

My wife is upset that I have brought a strange no-name girl into our home, but she sets up the guest room for her. She tries to persuade her to talk, to listen, to display some interest in her new surroundings, but it is of no use. My son is intrigued by the new arrival. He gives her his books, shows her his favorite cartoons, and even tries to teach her to play video games. He isn't

troubled by the lack of response; he simply continues his efforts with a reporter's dogged persistence.

My son attends a two-week summer camp in Rishikesh. He comes home bubbling about the skills he's learned, especially with a hammer and chisel. We buy him a block of wood from the local carpentry shop to keep him busy, and he hacks at it until his room is full of wood shavings. The girl watches his exploits silently, but I fancy that I see a flicker of interest in her eyes.

One Sunday afternoon, an exultant cry comes from my son's room. He runs out and displays to us a rectangular blob with legs.

"Don't you see? It's a dog!"

My wife pats his head; I nod distractedly from behind my laptop. There is a slight noise and I look up. The girl has come out of her room. She extends her hand and my son puts his figurine in it. She goes to his room and pulls his art supplies kit from under the bed, where he shoved it after the exam. She sits on his bed and begins to work, oblivious to the three of us standing in the doorway.

"Have you heard the story of the lonely dog?" she says. "There once was a dog that lived on the streets of Engram. With its white coat and black ears, the dog stood out from the other street dogs, which were sandy and tawny. The street dogs shunned him for his appearance, barking and nipping at his face if he tried to befriend them. The lonely dog ate carrion and refuse from dumpsters, while the other street dogs gorged on juicy bones discarded by the city eateries.

"One day, the prince of Engram was passing by and saw the lonely dog standing apart from its brethren, watching them squabble over the meat thrown out from an eatery. The prince felt sorry for the dog and asked his coachman to bring the lonely beast to him. He gave him meat and a nice kennel to live in, and played with him whenever he had time away from his royal duties.

"One day, when the prince was traveling through the city with the dog beside him, a man with a knife leaped at him. The prince's guards pinned down the attacker, but then an arrow came whizzing through the air and struck the prince in the shoulder. The lonely dog caught a glimpse of the archer at a window and took off to catch him as the guards rushed the prince to hospital.

"The dog broke into the room from which the archer had taken his shot, but there was nobody within. There was, however, a rag the archer had used, and the dog picked up the archer's scent from it. For three days and three

nights, the dog traversed the streets of Engram hunting for the archer, until he found him stowed away aboard a grain ship. The dog attacked the archer and dragged him through the streets to the palace. A letter from a nobleman was found in the archer's pocket, along with a slip for payment of three hundred gold pieces. The wicked nobleman confessed to orchestrating the attack as part of a larger ploy to grab the throne and was thrown in the dungeons.

"In gratitude, the prince elevated the lonely dog to the rank of Royal Hound. The royal family's crest was redesigned to depict a white dog with raised black ears. When the dog died, it was given a royal burial in the Cemetery of Kings."

My wife and I stare at each other when the story ends. The girl finishes painting the dog, walks over to us, and shyly holds out the figurine to my son. My son takes it and strokes its back, and the dog growls in pleasure.

That night, my wife and I talk about the girl. We have come to like her, despite her grimness and reticence, and we believe that, with time, she may come to like us, too. But if word gets out that she is once again able to give life to wooden carvings, I fear she will be exploited again.

The next morning at breakfast, we speak to the girl, and to our son.

"If the world finds out that you have regained your ability," I say, "they will want you to use it. The toy manufacturer will wave his contract in our faces and the authorities will take you away. We like you and want to adopt you into our family. However, that will probably mean you cannot tell your stories to these toys ever again. It is too dangerous. Do you think you would be okay with that?"

The girl stares at me, her big eyes filled with tears.

"Yes," she whispers.

The adoption procedure takes two years. The girl goes to school with my son, makes new friends, always comes first in art class. She tells my son stories, and soon he tells her some back. He writes down his stories, sends them off to a few newspapers. The day he publishes his first story, the wooden dog barks so much we are afraid the neighbors will hear.

The day the adoption is finalized, the girl gives me and my wife a box. We open it to find three identical carvings of a family, a man and a woman with a boy and a girl. The woodwork is a little crude, but the brushwork is delicate.

"I know you asked me not to make any more talking toys," says the girl, "but I couldn't stop myself from making these. I have never carved anything

before. I hope you like them."

My wife's carving stands on her dresser, mine on my office desk, and my son's on his dorm-room table. The girl is pursuing an apprenticeship in Paris under Olivier Manet, one of the world's foremost still-life artists. She has exhibited some of her paintings, and critics have raved about their lifelike quality. The carvings occasionally talk to us, tell us about the girl's adventures—her first taste of crème brûlée; her awe on staring up at the majestic Notre-Dame; her roommate who gave a solo violin recital before the French President. And sometimes they tell us about a village in the foothills of the Himalayas, where a father makes a toy elephant and his daughter paints it and tells it the tale of Shukram.

A Green Silk Dress and a Wedding-Death

By Cat Hellisen | 7310 words

*Cat Hellisen is a South African novelist best known for her critically acclaimed young adult books, most recently **Beastkeeper**, a haunting twist on the *Beauty and the Beast* myth. Her work previously appeared in F&SF with "The Girls Who Go Below" (July/August, 2014), an unsettling study of two sisters ensnared by a very bad man. We welcome the author back to these pages with this dark fantasy.*

HÉLOISE OUDEJAN LIVED by a cursed river that bled into a black ocean. She'd grown up in a two-room cottage that smelled of fish scales and outdoor latrines, in a room webby with spider silk and ghosts. The Oudejan house stood at the far end of Jitter Lane, squashed side to side with eleven other same-faced fisher-cottages; two rooms and a stone hearth, peeling plaster, dripping eaves. Héloise knew the feel of damp cold on the walls and underfoot. It was the river pushing its way up through thick red clay, moving bones, rearranging the dead so that Oma would have to poke the fire high and mutter invocations against restless spirits.

She'd been doing just that when Héloise had left for work: Oma bent over the fire, speaking to the dead in a dead language, while Héloise's little brother Gwil had snored in Oma's bed.

Gwil was the reason Héloise got up every morning. Why today, like every day, she'd dressed in her mended clothes and stumbled through the dark, remembering her way along the rutted path that led toward town and the docks. Héloise lived life through a veil of blurs and shadows, everything fuzzy at the edges and incomplete. Only if she held something close she could see the intricate wonder of it in perfect detail. Her impression of the world was formed in microscopic snatches, piecemeal. She could tell one person from another by the way they walked, and if she stuck her nose into a book she could read a sentence word by slow word, but that was the best of it.

Her first day of school she'd been placed at the back of the class and forgotten. Héloise had never been able to read the scrawled chalk on the pale green of the classroom blackboards, but she'd known better than to make a fuss. Making a fuss didn't get you nowhere except maybe dead.

Instead, Héloise had learned to listen.

She listened all the way to work, to the sound of the fog horns and the waves, and the slow drone of the trucks taking goods inland. When she got to the docks she would listen to the gossip and the news and the stories, and tuck the knowledge away. If she listened hard enough, Héloise had found that she could see the shape of things, know which way the world was turning.

Now she had a job in the harbor, where being short-sighted didn't make a difference. She'd left school at sixteen and learned to scale and gut fish so that Gwil always had food, and he wouldn't have to grow up pinched and bitter.

Héloise's hands were always cold and stained. Her hair stank like rotten seaweed no matter how often she washed it, and the smell crept into her clothes and skin, became a part of her.

Back when she'd been knee-high to a toad, and before Mama'd gone and got herself killed, Héloise had believed that the world could be better. That one day she'd wear new dresses instead of charity rags, that she'd wake up and the world would have drawn into focus, suddenly clear and crisp. She would know the whole of things and not just the parts she could examine in close up.

A car rattled past her and Héloise recognized it by the hiccuping skip of the engine. It was Ou Tien on his own way down to meet his son's boat.

"Thanks," she said to the fumes. She was practical enough to know that her boss wouldn't bother to offer her a lift. Didn't mean she had to like it.

Oma always said, "Wishing for sweeter makes you sour," which Héloise had taken to mean, "shut up and stop your whining." And it was true that wanting what you couldn't have only turned a heart bitter. Héloise had seen that with her own mother, so she'd stopped bothering and made the best of the good that fell confetti small into her life.

The sun was just silvering the sea by the time Héloise reached the docks. Atikka had got there before her, and was bringing in the baskets of fresh-caught fish. Atikka was one piece of confetti—an almost-friend. Like Héloise, she spent her mornings scaling and gutting fish, but she was a little younger, a little fatter, a little more loved. Despite this, she would spend the

morning working alongside Héloïse, sighing deeply, wrapped in a constant shroud of lovesick misery.

The morning passed in the slap of wet fish against the slick cobbles, the spill of guts, the shower of scales, and always, as a counterpoint to the glassy gasping of the fish, Atikka's ever lengthening sighs.

The sky had turned a deep and endless blue, the kind most conducive to stretching out bare legs under a baking sun, and daydream in mindless productivity. The men had offloaded their catches, and the girls prepared them for market, while the older women sold fish and molluscs to housewives and merchants. The chatter and buzz of the dock markets were a soothing familiar pattern. Héloïse didn't need to see it to know. The hum was regular. It spoke of constancy and purpose. The mundane rhythm of it was a comforting, boring story; far from curses and ghosts, and families full of secrets.

Atikka, sweat frizzing her hair and staining the armpits of her bleached sundress, set down her blade. The half-scaled fish lay across her brown legs like a dead baby. She looked mournfully down at it and sighed for the hundredth time.

"Who are you mooning over now?" Héloïse asked, finally defeated. It was a boy. Because it was always a boy. Listening to Atikka talk about her doomed romances was part of the price of friendship.

"Jutien," Atikka said. "He keeps walking past."

Jutien was the son of the boss. A fisherboy nearing manhood who spent all his nights out on the water and still somehow found the time and energy to stroll through the day markets to look at the girls. He called it "Inspections" and said he liked to keep an eye on the market, but no girl was stupid enough to fall for it, even though all the talk was how handsome he was, and about his wicked smile.

He had a voice that trickled into Héloïse's ears like warmed syrup. Even if she didn't like Jutien much, Héloïse still liked the sound of him.

"I think he's looking at me," Atikka said.

"He's not," snapped Héloïse as she ran her blade down the length of a large fish. The scales fell in a dry patter of tarnished silver. The lumpy and uneven stones of the harbour market were littered with scales that dulled and turned to trash as soon as they fell. Just like the girls on fish lane, really, Héloïse thought. She didn't want Atikka thinking Jutien was worth mooning over, not when the girl still had a scrap of dreaming to her. Men like Jutien

threw a mantle of charm over themselves to hide their broken knuckles and bruised fists.

Héloise and Atikka worked for Jutien's father, which meant both men acted as though they owned the girls. They could speak to them any way they pleased, tell them to work longer, or send them home after a bad catch without pay. Jutien had once had Héloise up against a brick wall in the small lanes about a year ago, back when she'd thought he was pretty and had thought sweet-talk was a good enough substitute for affection. He'd kissed her in a way that made her feel like she was choking to death, before he'd turned her around and pressed her against the wall. She remembered the damp scratch of brick, the smell of clay and moss and salt, the sharp suddenness of copper and come. He'd been, if not her first, certainly the first she'd thought herself almost caring for, and with the grunting thrust and jab of his exertions, had come to the realization that once again, this was all she was going to get.

After that, she never went out of her way to catch any boy's eye. Not because there was no fun to be had, but because it all seemed pointless, and all the little rush got you was a fat belly and more laundry and more mouths crying at you, and less food to go around.

And Atikka, silly and round and loved as she was, didn't deserve that as a future.

"Jutien looks at everyone like that. He'll take any girl who's willing." Héloise hadn't meant to be quite so sharp toward her little almost-friend. After all, Atikka was still a butterbrain, butterball, butterheart. Not that Héloise believed in saving people from themselves, but people talked. Atikka could go follow her heart and find it scraped raw, split open, or Héloise could talk instead of listening.

Truth was, Héloise was better at the other. She'd never learned to use words carefully.

Her cut had been too sharp, too pointed, and little butterball Atikka turned nasty. "Oh, will he?" she said sourly, all sighs puffed away in hot anger. "That's not what I heard."

"Oh, that's right? What did you hear?" Héloise scraped faster, fiercer, and flung the cleaned fish into its basket with the others.

"You're jealous." Atikka had abandoned her work.

Héloise kept her neck bowed, listening, not looking. Her hands were still moving, slicing heads and tails clean so that Jutien's father could sell the

scraps to poor wives and cheap kitchens.

Jealous? There was a thing. Héloise would have laughed, but Atikka was talking again.

"Jealous because you want him and he won't touch you."

The gutted fish stared at her with wide, dry, condemning eyes, their bells flopped open palely, the thin pinkness of their blood just staining the almost translucent flesh. Héloise pushed the point of her blade against one round eye, and wished she didn't have to listen to the things people said about her.

"Lissa down our way says he won't touch you because you're not worth the splitting open, you're such a fish-stinking, salt-water bitch."

* * *

Salt-water bitch. Not the first time Héloise had heard that leveled at her. She'd heard the same words from her father, spat at her mother after another night of drinking. A repeated story, with the same mean little ending.

She walked home the long way, not wanting to go straight from bleeding cold fingers that never stopped stinging to Gwil's snot-nose and Oma's sour, collapsed face; bitter and old and tired, the smell of old deaths hidden.

She took the little dry path that tacked through the fields past the school she no longer went to, toward the river.

The river was dark and brackish and wide as an empty future. Now and again, fishermen would stake nets when there was a silverside spawning run, but mostly they left the estuary water to itself. In winter, Héloise would come and gather bundles of reeds, and borrow Uncle Kavanei's curved thatching hook to fix the house roof, but mostly she too stayed away.

There were things living in the river, things that were best left undisturbed. People didn't say what, exactly, but she got the impression from their tone and whispers that they were bad things. Héloise figured that since she was also a bad thing, it really wouldn't make much difference if she sat on the river bank and let her bare feet hang in the gently swirling water. The river was stained red as tea, but that was from tree roots and tannins, she knew. Local legend said the river flowed bloody once a month, like a woman, unclean and deadly, but it was just more bullshit the people in the fishing town made up because their lives were so small and stupid.

The water was cool, soothing aches from her feet, and the sun was low and hot, warming her thighs and knees, reddening them a little. Tomorrow she'd be tanned olive as a stick. That was one nice thing about having sallow skin. She didn't burn, just went a deep golden brown that rich girls tried to fake with powders and sprays.

Héloise looked around. The place was deserted, screened by little gnarled bushes with small bright leaves. The birds called their same songs, the water rushed and slapped, but there was no swish of people moving through the grasses, or the suck of muddied footsteps. Satisfied that she was alone and unseen, she hiked her skirt up so that her legs could tan all the way up to her panty-line, and pulled off her top to reveal a rather saggy, gray bra with the elastic long since shot. It was the closest she'd get to a bikini tan.

The sun felt like a large warm hand that pressed gently against her back, that smoothed its finger tips down her neck and massaged the ache from her temples. She closed her eyes and lost herself in the bright red and orange burst of sun on closed lids, in the trickle of water and birdsong, and the far away drone and call of the village traffic.

It felt, for a moment, good. And that was okay too. That was the thing about everyone running around looking for some level of good they couldn't reach instead of just enjoying the good that they could. The problem with the world, Héloise thought. She was smarter than the rest of them, in this much at least. Let them call her names, let Jutien and Atikka and the people like them live their narrow lives.

What did it matter? You could listen, but it didn't mean you had to believe. That's what Mama had done. Believed all the things people said, and what had that got her in the end?

Not much of nothing.

Not much of a story to pass on.

Héloise was half-dozing, the sun sinking low, its caresses growing colder and distant like a lover working out how to leave quietly, when she heard the splash. She was used to the bright high slap of a fish leaping from the water, but this was bigger, a sound of shift and change, and Héloise opened her eyes to see the silver blur of a fish, big as woman's thigh, leap from the bloodied waters and hang in midair, a moment suspended out of time.

Héloise stared at the fish, and the fish's bulging pearl and black eye stared at her.

Springer, she thought. But it couldn't be. Not that big.

The fish moved, shimmered and in its place stood a black-and-pearl-eyed boy. No, a man, or some creature in a state between the two. He was wearing bright armor, metal scales overlapping, and he held a long thin spear, white and sharp as splintered bone. His hair was sea spray and the glint on the water. And that was all Héloise could make from her blurred and fragmentary world.

She stayed motionless, half in amazement and half in shame that she was sitting on a river bank in old underwear with her short skirt rolled up past her panty line. Just another docks girl, easy. A salt-water bitch. An unexpected surge of hate for men like Jutien rolled through her, hot and raw.

But the fish-mail boy didn't notice her. He waded through the red water, thrusting his spear to impale bright writhing fish. When he pulled the first from his spear and brought it to his face, Héloise thought he was going to eat it raw. Instead, he kissed the fish and set it free, blood meeting red river water. He did this again and again, and Héloise sat still, frozen as dusk fell, and her vision grew worse until all she could see was the pale flick of hair and fish, of scale and spear.

And then he was gone.

She breathed out slowly, shivering, her skin goosefleshed. Carefully, every movement stiff from the cold and from sitting too long, Héloise rolled her skirt down and pulled her top back on. Oma and Gwil would be waiting.

Héloise trailed home in the green light of almost-evening, and wondered what she had just seen. Not human, for sure. A river spirit, perhaps. But he hadn't seemed right for their river. A river spirit here should be thick and old, bloated with silt and dyed crimson and brown.

Perhaps, like a salmon, he was a sea thing spawned in fresh water. An ocean spirit. That's why she'd never seen him before. He was moving down river, closer to the ocean.

Or perhaps he was nothing, and she'd been dreaming in the late sun, seeing things that weren't there. After all, her vision was never to be trusted. Héloise shook her head, and trudged through the stretching darkness.

* * *

THE FIRST SIGN that the water spirit had not been nothing were the fish.

Jutien dumped his catch at Héloïse and Atikka's feet. "Would you fucking look at this," he yelled, as though the catch was their fault.

Atikka scrabbled back, panting. "Oh, that's hideous!"

Unable to see the exact problem, Héloïse leaned forward to pull the nearest fish from the wide basket. The first fish looked fine until inspected close up, as did the second. The third was a monstrosity. It had once been a yellowmouth, but now it was a knot of twisted flesh with tails sprouting where its eyes should have been, and a row of dully staring round eyes along its side, following the swim line. Héloïse shuddered and ran a fingertip lightly along its broad scales. They felt strangely slimy, soft. The fish gasped, still almost alive, and Héloïse looked into a mouth filled with another head, a tiny screaming row of teeth within teeth. She tossed the fish down. "How many?"

Jutien kicked the basket with the side of his foot, then shoved his hands in his pockets. "More than half the catch."

That was unusual. Sports turned up now and again, but never in such numbers. "Why didn't you throw them back?"

"And have them breeding? Nah, fuck, we'll grind this lot up and sell it to the pig and fowl merchants for feed." He grinned. "You girls can sort 'em for me."

"Ugh, Jutien, no...", Atikka said. "What if I catch something from them?"

"I'll do it," Héloïse said. She felt vaguely sorry for the fish. They hadn't asked to be born hideous and strange.

The week was filled with monstrosities. Every catch was more gruesome than the last, the tortured fish more misshapen, their deformities reaching extremes that even Héloïse found disturbing. "Why?" she asked Atikka one day. Their brief stand-off was over, Atikka's sulking silence broken by the need to share her life with someone, even if that someone was Héloïse.

"What's happened? Has anyone said anything about what might have caused it?" A toxic spill, a bacteria bloom...even a sudden storm that had washed monsters up from the deep. But there had been nothing that Héloïse had heard.

"It's a curse," said Atikka.

Héloïse thought of the fish-mail boy kissing the fish before setting them back in the water. But those had been river fish, not ocean fish. *Rivers flow to the sea*. The thought turned her stomach. Had the water spirit set some vengeful curse into their seas—and why would he, she wondered as she

chopped the deformed fish, piling them up into stacks of squarish chunks. These were going to be sent to the farmers. No one was happy about it. The feed sold cheap—too cheap—and people were swearing up and down that now the eggs they bought tasted like fish. Soon, they would have to sell the discards as fertilizer. Cheap-cheap.

Atikka or Héloise would be fired. There wasn't money enough to pay two girls. Her knife landed with a solid thunk. Not Atikka. She was still waiting to be captured, falling for Jutien's mulberry words, sweet and tart-black.

It would be Héloise. She drew in a deep breath and chopped faster.

"Jutien says," said Atikka, "that there's a story about this."

"Is there now." There were always stories. Héloise settled in to listen to them, to add them to her store.

"Yeah, going back all the way to when the Ilin lived here."

The Ilin who were mostly gone, wiped out by disease and betrayal and interbreeding with the Kari, who had come sweeping in from the eastern reaches, toward the sea. "Tell me this story," said Héloise.

"Oh, I don't know it. Superstitious Ilin nonsense from upriver. Something about how the spirit is angry because no one gives him sacrifices anymore." Atikka set down her own blade and stretched her arms high overhead, fingers linked. "My back is killing me. You know the kind of things, man."

"What things? Why would I know?"

"Ugh, come on. Your oma's mostly Ilin, I heard. You've got a little of their look, you know."

"No." Héloise stabbed her knife point down into her chopping board. "I don't. Anyway. I'm done here. I'll just take this basket up to Ou Tien and then I'm off."

"Mmm." Atikka looked away. "I'll wait for Jutien. He said he'd give me a lift home."

Héloise bit her lips so that she wouldn't let her exasperation stream out of her. "Watch yourself," was all she said, and Atikka scowled.

* * *

"Tell me," Héloise said to Oma, while she cracked long green beans into a chipped bowl, the sweet green pop satisfying as breaking a neck. "About

the river spirits of the Ilin."

Oma snorted imperiously; an empress in ashes at the stove. She was frying mustard seeds and crushed garlic, the water pot frothing and ready for the green beans to blanch. Green beans and mutant fish that Héloïse bought when none of the other workers could see her, Jutien smirking as he sold her pig food. "You don't want to hear that rubbish," Oma said, in a way that only made Héloïse want to.

Mama had been Ilin too. It was only Papa who had snagged her to civilization, beaten his salt-water bitch sound and sweet, then killed her so she would learn not to talk back. Their bones were under the hearth stones. Héloïse knew this because she had helped Oma boil the meat from their bodies. They had fed the flesh and broth to that year's pig, fat and stinking at the bottom of the garden. The bones had gone under the hearth, under iron to keep the ghosts quiet. Only Oma and Héloïse knew this. Little Gwil was deaf and blind to truth, innocent and selfish with it.

Oma had killed Papa with the iron skillet, then stitched his mouth closed with fish hooks so that his ghost could never talk. His bones were packed under iron to stop his roaming, sung to in Ilinish to lull him asleep.

The village only knew that Mama had run away, leaving her children—just like any no-good Ilin woman, useless slattern, barbarian witch—and Papa had gone off to bring her back.

No one asked questions.

"I want to hear the stories."

Héloïse tipped the bowl into the boiling water, and the bubbles subsided. "There's a river spirit that Mama used to talk about." She did not say she'd seen it.

Oma looked over to where Gwil was bashing blocks of wood together, making them brrrm like cars. "What do you know about your mother?"

Héloïse shrugged. "Nothing. She was full-blood, but you and her both lied and said she wasn't. She was born in Cressid, not here, and you came down to join her after the war, in the seventies." Such a sad litany of a life. Héloïse could remember little else. Her mother had always seemed to her to be useless. A little rabbit, a frightened, weak, and pathetic thing, cringing from Papa but never running away. She remembered the smell of her breath at night, cheesy-sour with milk-beer, her eyes dark and wide and drugged. Too skinny, bruised. She would forget to wash and the flies would sing hymns

about her hair, waiting for her to die. She had been a ghost before Papa had beaten her to death.

There was one good memory only. So bleary and blurry that Héloïse thought it less a memory and more a hopeful dream, a child's wish to make magic from the terrifyingly ordinary.

A green dress.

A silk dress.

A water dress.

Her mother had never worn it, but in Héloïse's dream, she had unrolled it and held it up to her shoulders where it had flowed down her body like ice-black water, the shadows dark as hidden pools, the green frost of sea storms, of rapids and rills. Her mother had danced, holding the dress to her chest, and for that moment, Mama had been beautiful.

A dream too lovely for this cold musty place where the corners of the house were held together by mouse droppings and dust-hares.

"Your mother was never meant to marry Petit Alessand," Oma said. "She was already spoken for."

"Oh." Héloïse took the pot from the stove and drained the beans before handing them to Oma who swept them deftly into the spiced oil. This was something she'd not heard before. "She was betrothed?"

"No." Oma stirred, her eyes on the food and not on Héloïse, but Héloïse knew this to be an excuse, an avoidance. Oma could make fish and beans with her eyes bound in black silk. "She was a sacrifice. We understood, even if we did not like it. There are rites and truths older than the Kari will ever understand. Every fifty years the river would need its sacrifice. Always, the most beautiful of our people, young, and sweet as a veal-collop. Sometimes a young man, sometimes a maiden. It did not matter. Whoever they were, they were given to the water."

It sounded...barbarous. Unbelievable. It sounded like the things the Kari said about the Ilin. Child sacrifice, evil. Héloïse didn't want to hear the rest of the story.

"We dressed her in silk and sorrow," said Oma. "And tied her wrists and ankles with stones that rang like bells. We garlanded her with lily buds and pond weed, and carried her on a stretcher made from young boughs skinned white, the bark burnt for incense, the wood smelling sweet and new." She spoke as though the room were dark and a fire burned over the buried bones,

as though the city outside had fallen away, and eyes glowed like lamps in the story-light, ears were pricked.

Héloise hugged herself, and listened.

"She should have drowned. She should have been taken to the water spirit's city, to be his lover in the deep." Oma dropped her head and the song fell out of her voice, leaving it cracked and old again. "Instead, Petit Alessand came and rescued her. Took her away from her death and gave her this life instead." She sighed deep and low. "So we suffer."

It was bullshit. Of course it was. Made-up Ilin nonsense that Mama had brought with her down river. Still. "What happens if the sacrifice isn't given?"

"Who knows?" Oma said, and tipped the flesh of warped fish into the dinner plates. "Come. Eat."

* * *

It was Jutien who called the hunt together. On a night when the moon was full and fat and hung between the cape's peaks like a ripe fruit waiting for fingers to reach up and tug it free, he gathered the young men of Derleth village and led them up the blood river, with their long nets, with their spears and their hooks. They went with spells older than their cities and their cars, with long nets of knotted kelp, with spears of black alder, with hooks of moon-kissed silver.

They caught him.

It.

They caught the river spirit like he was a fish, froth-finned, scale-armoured, mouth gasping, gill-flared. A deep-thing.

Héloise heard their whooping and shouting from the cottage, in dreams, and turned over in her sleep, dampening the pillowcase with tears she would not remember in the morning.

* * *

"What's going on?" Héloise sauntered up to Ou Tien's stall, where Atikka was already standing, her hands by her sides, her knives waiting to be picked up. A vast crowd jostled about the market, the sky teeming with gulls. Too busy, even for morning. And the air smelled wrong. It was garlanded with wood smoke and the pungent reek of milk-beer. "Was there a party last night or something?" It would have been typical if there had been, and she'd not been invited. Fuck, who cared? All that would have happened was the men would have ignored her until they were drunk, then, if they hadn't found a girl to pair off with, would press her against a wall and paw at her tits like slobbering imbecile babies.

She could live without an invitation to Kari fun.

"No." Atikka turned to face her, and Héloise squinted, trying to read some expression through the blur of eyes and mouth. "They caught it."

"Caught what?" But Héloise's stomach filled with river pebbles, cold and black. Eels twisted through her intestines.

"The river spirit. There really was one." Atikka's voice had grown childish in her excitement. She sounded like a brat at a party, waiting for the magician to come fool her with doves and flowers. "We can't see it right now. Jutien is charging two shills a look, but he said he'd show me after work. Free, yanno?" She faltered at Héloise's silence. "I'll ask if you can look too. I'm sure he won't mind."

"It's still alive?" Héloise asked softly. It couldn't be the fish-creature she'd seen leaping from the river. The white-maned man with his pearl-and-black eyes. He had been magical, beautiful. Even Jutien and his people couldn't capture magic and slave it for amusement.

"Uh-huh." Atikka nodded. "They're keeping it in a tank."

"Oi!"

Both girls started at the deep shout, as Ou Tien lumbered into view. "I don't pay you chits to stand about gossiping. You've years yet to get haggard as fish wives. Get to work!"

The day passed like every other day that had gone before, only, Héloise noticed, there were fewer of the malformed fish. Already, the curse was broken. And streams of people swished past her, their feet tapping as they went to pay to see Jutien's monster, his fish-thing from the deep. "Hideous," they shrieked to each other as they left. "Gods, did you see it!" though of course they had all seen it. They had stood together under the darkened tent

Jutien had set up, and stared at their nightmares, the impossible made mundane.

"It's a trick," a mustached man was telling his belledame as they walked past, trying not to slip on intestines and scales and gull shit. "Some poor deformed boy they've paid to hold his breath and wear outlandish costumes."

"Of course," said the woman. "Hair dye, glue, sequins." She skipped over a raised cobble and splashed muck against Héloise's legs. "Ridiculous really. That we would fall for superstitious Ilin nonsense."

"We are educated," agreed the man, and Héloise concentrated on gutting fish and not stabbing him in his broad, sweaty back.

When dark fell in swathes of indigo and orange, in showers of comet dust and echoed street lights, Jutien took Atikka to go see his catch.

"And Hël?" she asked.

Jutien looked at Héloise with a dismissive grunt, but said neither yes nor no, so Héloise followed them to the tent. It was small, a little side-show thing propped up on wooden poles and hammered into place with steel pegs. Red rocks marbled with white held down the edges of the tent walls to stop them flapping in the sea winds. Inside, the light was cold and white and weak from the LED lamps the fishermen would take with them at night. The tank sat in the middle. Someone's old discarded fish tank, the corners stained with old algae, the rubber glue seals limned glow-blue, a fine crack in one corner. It was a big tank for fish, but a small one for a man.

"Dear gods," said Atikka in a low breathy voice. "Is it real?" She pressed her palm to the glass, and the shadowed shape moved, slurring the waters.

"Real as I am," said Jutien. "And ten times as ugly."

"You're not ugly," Atikka said, and the two began a lumbering flirtation.

Héloise ignored them and let the soft glow of the tank pull her forward. She drifted through the dusk-dark, eddies of cold air tugging her to the shallow shadows. She echoed Atikka's touch, fingers and palm to cold glass. Inside, the spirit stared back at her, pearl and black, his white hair wreathed about him. Incense smoke underwater, milk blooming in tea.

Every face Héloise had ever seen was blurred beautiful, and the water spirit was no exception. He was carved smooth by her disability, ugliness rendered clean in plain broad strokes.

In her head a man's voice whispered, *Sidonie*.

Héloise drew back, shivering.

Sidonie. You owe me, the voice said. A green silk dress and a wedding death, but I'll take the freedom. A fair trade. It laughed.

Héloise ran away, not caring that Atikka called after her, or that Jutien laughed as cruel and cold as the voice in her head.

* * *

FREEDOM FOR DEATH wasn't much of a trade. Héloise told herself she should forget about curses and water-spirits and green dresses. Mama was long dead and buried, and Héloise didn't owe the spirit anything. Her mother's debts were not her own.

The thought stayed in her head, endless as a circle. After all, it wasn't every day river spirits spoke to her. It changed the story.

"Did Mama have a dress?" Héloise asked. Gwil was sick, and Oma had been carrying him about all day, trying to soak his fever heat down with cold compresses. Now Héloise carried his heavy, sweaty body against her chest, cooing and rocking him, even though he was no longer a baby.

"She had enough dresses," Oma said. There was no cheap fish left. She was cooking rice gruel with the last tomatoes and cabbage and green peppers from the garden.

"This one was beautiful though," Héloise said. "It was made of silk, and gr—"

"Your Papa burned it," snapped Oma. "Go ask next door if you can borrow some milk."

She left Gwil crying and went to beg a cup of milk from their neighbor, who gave it to her only out of a wretched pity born of facing the same long road downward. Héloise carried the milk back, and did not cry. Instead, she wondered what a river spirit would give her if she fulfilled her mother's sacrifice.

Sure, freedom for death mightn't be a good trade. But freedom for freedom. That was a better one.

Héloise had to wait for Gwil and Oma to fall asleep before she could go sneaking to Oma's bed, to pull out from under it the bashed and rusted tin chest that had once held anything of value. It scratched against the floor, and Oma muttered in her sleep, but did not wake.

There was no key. Or rather, there was, but Oma wore it round her neck on a piece of dirty string, and Héloïse had no intention of trusting her luck that far. Instead she used one of the pins from her hair and wiggled and wriggled until the tiny levers clicked into place, and she could swing the lid up. It groaned on ungreased hinges, sounding like Papa waking from a hangover so bad he wished for death.

Inside were papers. Papers of birth, old letters, money from another country long gone. There was a small blue vase made of milky glass that Héloïse vaguely remembered seeing last when she was no older than Gwil was now. She touched it gently, found the seam of where it had been inexpertly glued back together, was bitten by the ragged chip on its fluted lip. The papers rustled at her, the sound of leaves burning, and she pushed them aside.

The dress lay at the bottom, sunk down beneath the layers to settle cold as silt, slick between Héloïse's fingers. She drew it out slowly and closed the tin box.

* * *

It was still dark when she reached the emptied market. The steel bones of the market stalls broke the market into an architectural skeleton of squared-off ribs and narrow femurs. The tent stood in the middle, lights glowing around it, a guard at the front. He was one of Jutien's crowd, a boy-man with thick red hair and wide lips. August would one day be almost handsome in a raw and powerful way, but for now he was thick-fingered and broad-cheeked and hollow-ribbed with growing.

Héloïse stripped in the shadows, dropping her grey panties and stretched-out bra into a puddle of ugliness, then reached upward and let the silk fall down her body, a gliding wave that left her teeth chattering, her skin prickled with goose flesh. The dress made her breath steam the air, her hands and feet go numb with pain.

Dressed for her mother's wedding-death, Héloïse went to the guard.

"You're not meant to be here," August said. "Agh, it's only you. What do you want?"

"To see the monster."

"Ha, like I'm going to let you go in for free. Five shills."

"Jutien's only charging two."

August leaned on his wooden staff, and laughed. The white lanterns threw his face into whiplash stripes. "So? I'm not Jutien."

"I don't have any money." Héloise held herself in her river water dress and waited for heat to come back to her, but instead she grew colder. She could smell salt and brackish stink, rotting fish, the pungent black reek of trapped mud and debris. It lifted from her skin in waves.

"Yeah. Didn't think so."

Héloise waited for him to come to his conclusion, breathing in slow relief when he smiled sly and said, "But I heard things from Jutien about you. ..."

* * *

The tent flap fell closed behind her. There were no lamps lit now, and it took a few moments for her sight to adapt to the starless dark. She could hear the bubble and hum of the pumps, the soft slow splash of moving water.

Sidonie.

Héloise shook her head. "I'm not her."

You're wearing her dress.

"I'm wearing my dress." Naked beneath the silk, August's seed running down her legs. "I'm here to set you free." She could do it. There were stones littered about the tent. It had been simple to pick one up once August was dreamy-satisfied, and hide it in the folds of her skirt. She lifted her fist, the stone pointed like a dagger. She was strong. One good blow. "And we're not far from the sea. You can run, yes?"

There was no answer, but the shadow in the water moved. A nod, Héloise thought, from the way his white hair curled and streamed.

"But I won't set you free," she whispered. "Not even for her. Her debts are not mine."

The river spirit waited.

"What happens to the sacrifices?" she asked. Those girls and boys from a country she'd never seen. Héloise knew all about sacrifices. Mama had withered away before she'd died, but she'd sacrificed herself anyway, stayed

with Petit Alessand so that her children would have a father. Or something. Perhaps it would have been better to go to a faster death. "When you drown them?"

It cocked its head. *What do you think ?*

"Death, I suppose."

And after that ? The water spirit sounded curious. *Do you think death is all there is for humans ?*

"Guess I'll find out." She shrugged. "Today, or some other day."

The spirit laughed soundless in the water, bellringing in her head. So loud her temples throbbed and Héloïse winced. "You will give me more than death," she said when the chime faded. "Or I'll leave you here. Jutien will get bored of you, eventually. The town will stop paying to see how ugly you are, and you'll cost Jutien more than you're worth. Lights, pumps, a guard on duty." She waved her free hand at the small enclosed space. "What happens when Jutien gets bored of you? He has caught you, and he always gets bored of the things he catches."

You tell me . The voice managed to sound sulky, almost human.

"He will cut your head from your shoulders and give you to me. I will gut you. I will slide a knife under your scales and they will litter the cobbles. Jutien will take your broken body away in a basket. He will feed your flesh through a grinder, and sell you to pig farmers."

The spirit stared. *Fine. We will make a bargain, Sidonie.*

"Not Sidonie." Héloïse swallowed. "She's dead. You get me instead. Now, how do I keep you to a promise?"

The spirit drifted closer to the tank glass, and Héloïse stepped to meet it. She could always see too much when she was close, the pores of skin, the fine wrinkles, the tiny scabs and sores that went unnoticed by others. No big picture for Héloïse, just innumerable fine details.

The spirit's eyes up close were shifting rings of silver and pearl and ebony, round pupiled and unblinking; his scales were a rainbow sheen, each so small that they could only be seen by Héloïse. *There is no promise, Sidonie. There is only trust. My name is Sil e Catthia, and I will not drown a willing spouse.*

It was not quite the bargain Héloïse had wanted but it was better than staying in a two-room cottage, turning sour, and growing old, working for Jutien, scaling fish and eating cabbage soup. It was better than one day falling

into a marriage because there was nowhere else to go. Better than broken bones and being buried under a hearth. It was better than failing forever.

Instead of a slow trudge to death it was an unexpected step sideways. "So the rest weren't willing, then?"

Héloise listened for an answer that only she could hear.

"Oi, how long you gonna be in there?" August called from outside the tent. "You said five minutes."

"Tell me," Héloise whispered, fierce.

Sil shook his head. Trust.

Trust the word of a monster. Héloise closed her eyes for a moment. She knew what real monsters were. Men like Petit Alessand, and Jutien, and August. Small petty monsters who broke women slowly with words and fists and sneers. Who used them up and discarded them when they were bent and shriveled.

Here she stood dressed to meet a monster out of stories. At least this way, maybe she would become bigger than just half-blind Héloise Oudejan who lived at the end of Jitter Lane. Her name would be a warning told to children. *Don't do this. Don't wish for more. Know your place.*

And somewhere, someone would listen to the story that lay under the warning. The story that whispered, *but she did not die old and broken, she became queen of the deep, she became cold and clean as a curse, and now when the market boys call her a salt-water bitch, you can see the whites of their eyes.*

"My name is Héloise a Sidonie, and I will not gut a willing spouse." She raised the stone and smashed it hard as she could against the glass, at the weakest point. The side shattered and fell in a massive crash, the water falling in a shower of brokenness. She dropped the stone and grabbed blindly, felt the slick fish skin under her palm and closed her fingers. "Run!"

* * *

HE DID NOT DROWN HER, though the water was so cold, so salt, so raging, so black that Héloise thought perhaps it didn't matter. She choked on her fear as Sil pulled her down, she choked on his kiss until she grew bold enough to return it. He tasted like fresh white mussels, like the sea.

They went deeper, far from where the estuary spilled red water and broken vegetation into the ocean. Shades and shimmers flickered past her and Héloïse stopped fighting for air, breathed out the last of her land self in a stream of bright motes.

The cold stopped hurting, the green dress cleaved to skin, the long wings fusing into fins, her hair clouding the water, leaving a trail of ink.

Below them Héloïse saw city lights, clean and clear, the whole world above recreated below in sharp focus, in echoes and mirrors, and her heart leaped fishbright.

Miss Cruz

By James Sallis | 2988 words

One of the wonderful things you discover about writers, once you get to know a few, is that most care deeply about other things in addition to books and are hidden repositories of unexpected expertise. Which only makes sense—after all, the very best writers have things they have to write about.

James Sallis has been a musician for as long as he's been a writer, and if you're lucky enough to be in the Phoenix area and know where to look you can catch him playing a whole carload full of instruments with the band Three-Legged Dog. Until that happens, we leave you with this story about a man and a very special guitar.

I THINK I ALWAYS KNEW I didn't fit in. I'd look around at the families, their dogs and bikes and travel trailers, parents hopscotching cars out of the driveway every morning to go to work, and knew I'd never be a part of that. Most of us feel that way, I guess, when we're young. But with me it wasn't a matter of feeling. I knew.

The other thing I knew was that I needed secrets, needed to know things others didn't, have keys to doors that stayed locked a lot. When I was a kid, for two years all I could think or read about was magic tricks, this arcane stuff no one knew much about. Thurston's illusions, Chung Ling Soo, Houdini. Sleight of hand and parlor magic and bright lacquered cabinets. Read every book in the library, spent the little money I had on a subscription to a slick magazine named *Genie* out of L.A. Later it was Hawaiian music (can't remember how that got started), then nineteenth-century clocks. I was looking, you see, looking for stuff other people didn't know, looking for secrets. They were as essential to me as water and the air I breathed.

One thing I *didn't* know was that I'd wind up here in this desert, where it looks, as someone told me when I first came, like God squatted down, farted, and lit a match to it. Long way from the hills and squirrel runs I grew up in.

Everything low and spread out, dun-colored and difficult. But hey, you want to build this big-ass city, how much better could you do than smack in a wasteland where it's a hundred degrees three months out of the year and water, along with everything else, has to be trucked in?

But cities are like lives, I guess; when we start out we never know what they're going to turn into. So here I am, living in what's politely termed a residential hotel on the ass-end side of Phoenix, Arizona, with half a dozen T-shirts, two pair of jeans, a week's worth of underwear if I don't leak too much, some socks, a razor and a toothbrush. Oh—and a four-thousand dollar guitar. It's a Santa Cruz, black as night all over, not even any fret markers on her. Small, but with this huge sound.

Because I'm a musician, see. Have the black suit, white shirt and tie to prove it. They're all tucked into one of those dry-cleaner bags in the back of what passes for a closet here. It's the size of a coffin; at night I hear things with bristly legs moving around in there. Outside the closet, there's half of what began life as a bunk bed, a table whose formica top has a couple of bites out of it, two chairs, and a dresser with a finish that looks like maple candy.

And the guitar case, of course, all beat to hell. Same case I've had all along, came with the Harmony Sovereign I found under the bed in a rented room back in Clarksdale, Mississippi, around 1980, when it all started. Second one, a pawnshop guitar, didn't have a case, so I kept this one, and after that—well, not much history or tradition in my life, you work with what you have. Been a lot of guitars in there since. Couple of J-45s, an old small-body Martin, a Guild archtop, Takamines, a Kay twice as old as I am. Really get some looks when I pull this gorgeous instrument out of that case. Books and covers, right?

I forgot to mention the stains on ceiling and mattress. Lot of similarities among them; I know, I've spent many a night and long afternoon sandwiched between, mattress embossed with personal stories, all those who fell to Earth here before me, stains on the ceiling more like geological strata, records of climate changes, weather, cold winters and warm.

It's not a big music town, Phoenix. Mostly a big honking pool of headbangers and cover bands, but there's work if you're willing. What do I play? Like Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones* said when asked what he was rebelling against: What do you got? Mariachi, Beatles tributes, polka, contra, happy-hour soft jazz—I've done it all. Even some studio work. But my bread

and butter's country. Kind of places you find an ear under one of the tables as you're getting the guitar out of the case and the bartender tells you good, they've been looking for that, got torn off in a fight last weekend.

Those gigs, mostly Miss Cruz stays in the case, right there by me all night, and I play a borrowed Tele that belongs to—I started to say a friend, but that's not right. An associate? Man doesn't play, but he has this room with thirty or more guitars, all top drawer, and humidifiers pouring out fog everywhere so you go in there it's like stepping into a rain forest, you keep expecting parrots to fly out of the soundholes. Jason Fletcher. We work together sometimes. Secrets, remember? And he's a lawyer.

Thing is, musicians get around, hear things. We're on the street, out there wading in the sludge of the city's bloodstream. And we're like furniture in the clubs, no one thinks we're listening or paying attention or give half a damn. Plus, we get to know the barkeeps and beer runners, who see and hear more than us.

So I do a little freelance work for Jason sometimes. Started when he came by Bad Mojo down on the lower banks of McDowell looking for a client of his who owed him serious money and caught me with a pickup band playing, of all things, Western Swing. Strong bass player/singer, solid drummer, steel player who'd been at it either two weeks or forty years, hard to tell. Anyhow, Jason and I got to talking on a break and he said how he'd always wanted to play like that and wanted to know if I gave lessons. People are coming up to you all the time at gigs and asking that, so I didn't think much of it, but a few days later, comfortably late in the morning, my phone rang. After work that day he swung by, and when he opened up the case he was carrying, there was a kickass old Gibson hollowbody.

The lesson lasted about twenty minutes before dissolving into gearhead chatter. Man could barely play a major scale or barred minor chord, but he knew everything about guitars. Woods, inlay, model designations, who made what for whom, Ditson, Martin, the Larsons, Oscar Schmidt—had it all at his fingertips, everything but music.

"Were you mathematically inclined as a child?" I remember he asked. It was a question I'd heard before and, knowing where he was taking it, I said no, it's just pattern recognition: spatial relationships, forms. That musicians, all artists, are just compulsive pattern-makers at heart.

And like with music, you stay loose, follow where life takes you. You've got the head, the changes, but the tune's what you make of it, you find out

what's in there. So when the lesson dismembered itself we went out for a beer and went on talking and the rest just kind of developed from there. He'd say keep an ear out for this or that, or once in a while something would drift my way that had a snap to it and I'd pass it along.

For the rest, I have to go back a year or so.

It's a breezy, cold spring and I'm sitting in the outdoor wing of a coffeehouse with half an inch left in my cup for the last half hour looking over at the café next door, Stitches, a frou-frou place heavy on fanciful salads and sandwiches. There's a waitress over there that just looks great. Nothing glamorous or even pretty about her, plain, really, a summer-dress kind of girl, but these sad, unguarded eyes and, I don't know, a presence. Also an awkwardness or hesitancy. She'll stall out by a table sometimes. Or you look over and she's just standing there—on pause, like, holding a plate or a rag or the coffee.

There are all kinds of ways of knowing things, and in the weeks I've been watching, it's become obvious that she and the manager are down. Nothing in the open, but lots of small tells for the watchful: their faces when they talk to one another, the way their bodies kind of bend away from one another when they pass, occasional glances into the relic'd mirrors set up like baffles all through the café.

Secrets. Things others don't know.

And in the past few days it's become just as obvious that it's over. They've had The Talk. She stalls out more often, gets orders wrong, forgets refills and condiments.

So, lacking much of an attention span and with a loose-limbed hold on reality, I'm sitting there, looking over, thinking how great it would be if she went calmly to the cooler behind the counter, grabbed a pie, walked up to him, and let him have it. Everyone over there in Stitches is staring. And the manager is standing stock still with meringue and peaches dripping off his nose.

All at once then I come to, back to my surroundings, to realize that I'm witnessing, with a half-second delay, exactly what I've been picturing in my mind.

Now *that's* interesting.

Sweat runs down my back as I wonder how far I can take this.

One of the other waitresses runs into the kitchen, comes back with a can of whipping cream, and lets him have it in the face, right there by the

peaches. A few customers look upset, but most are laughing. The cooks come out, stand around him, and sing Happy Birthday. Then I have everybody hold still, like a picture's just been taken, then they move, then I stop them again, another picture.

Cool.

Then I get scared and bolt.

That night at a club called Tip's I sat down with my guitar and ran an E chord into an A as many ways as I could think of all over the neck, but that was it. After fifteen or twenty minutes, without saying anything, I put the guitar back in its case and left. Didn't play for weeks, didn't go out in public at all, really, just hung in my room. The pictures of those people in the restaurant doing what I was imagining in my mind, *exactly* what I was imagining in my mind, those stayed with me. But like pictures on a wall, eventually you get used to them, stop seeing them when you walk past. So after a while I eased on back into the world. I'd like to say I was strong enough or scared enough never to repeat the incident, never to take that song for another ride, but of course I wasn't.

Miss Cruz came to live with me not long after that. She wasn't happy where she was—a common story: unloved and unappreciated, neglect, abuse—and where *he* is, he has no need for her. His needs are pretty simple. They change the catheter every few days, squirt stuff in his eyes to keep them from drying out. I went there once to visit. Keep telling myself I didn't put him there, his own choices did—and that night he decided to beat up on his woman in the bar where I was playing.

This entire aspiring society, humankind itself, is built and maintained on violence. We all know that, but pretend we don't. What matters is when and against whom you let the dogs out, right?

So back now to Jason Fletcher, who'd shown up weeks before at a wine bar where I was playing a solo early-evening gig to tell me the sheriff's office was harrassing his client and he'd appreciate my keeping ears open for anything that might help. Sheriff Jack Dean, a stump-legged rind of a man with a bad comb-over, long history of marginally legal activity, and continuous reelection by preying on fear. Fletcher's client had written an elaborately researched, clear-eyed series about him for the *Republic* and now found himself followed by unmarked cars wherever he went. Waiting outside his house in the morning, parked across from the coffee shop where he stopped on the way to work.

"These boys are slick from years of practice," Fletcher said, "they've got it down to a fine art. No marks, no bruises."

What came to me, what I picked up off the forest floor, wasn't all that much, but it worked. The guy was able to drink his coffee in peace, rumors of lawsuits and worse evaporated, no more was heard of the "inquiry" that had sheriff's men knocking on neighbor's doors.

It haunted me, after. I looked up the journalist's series in the *Republic*, read every word and climbed over every comma twice. Dropped in with ears open at a downtown bar frequented by cops. Understand, I'm not the kind ever to pay much heed to politics. Never thought about how rotten the whole thing was, or much cared. And if I did, simply assumed that corruption and greed had to be the universal standard. It's politics, right? And politics is about power, so how else could it be played? As for me, I just wanted to be left alone, to play my guitar, make music. But that whole sheriff thing wouldn't let go of me, kept nipping at my heels, pissing on my shoes. Who can say why it is some things stick to us? I'd be sitting in OK Coffee or 5&10 Diner, see a county car pull in, or some beat-up dude staggering by outside, and it would all start back up.

Something growing in the dark within me.

Then one night it's four A.M. after a free-jazz gig with a sax player, music with a lot of anger inside, and the anger comes home with me. One of those nights when moonlight's spilling everywhere, then clouds slide in and it goes dark. No wind, no breeze—like the world's stopped breathing. Neighbors somewhere playing what sounds like Texas conjunto on the radio. I'm rattling around the room like always after gigs, drained and dog-tired but still wired, cranked up to the very edge, when there's a change in the light, a flicker, and I look up at the TV. I've had it on with no sound, silent company in the night. *Breaking News*, the screen reads now. I turn up the sound.

There's been a huge raid on a houseful of illegals out near the county hospital. Clips show a dozen or more half-dressed adults and kids being loaded into vans. Peace officers and TV crew outnumber them three to one. Lights worthy of a movie set. Then a cut—live!—to the man himself, Sheriff Jack, at his desk, American flag at parade rest behind him. Hard at the helm even at this hour, working as ever (he tells us) to uphold the laws of the land, serve the good people of Maricopa County, defend every border, and keep us all safe.

Not a single word about profiling, illegal traffic stops, unwarranted search and seizure, rampant intimidation, financial irregularities, or the ongoing federal investigation of his department.

As he speaks, he touches his nose again and again, age-old tell of the liar. Third or fourth time, he takes the finger away, looks at it a moment, and sticks it *in* his nose. He's digging around in there. Still talking, talking, talking.

And I realize that what I just saw, the nose touch, the nose pick, I pictured in my mind half a moment before it happened.

Sheriff Jack pulls the finger out, examines it, and tries the other nostril.

I'm thinking okay, so I don't have to be there, looks like I just have to see it, as the good sheriff, never for a moment ceasing his recitation, drops down in a squat and duckwalks across the office floor, a full-bore Chuck Berry, cameraman struggling to change headings, go with the flow.

Escalations are taking place. In what the sheriff is doing, the brutal comedy of it. In the ever-increasing alarm stamped on his face: wild eyes, frantic silent appeals stage left and right. In my anger, growing by the moment. In the anything-but-comedy of my horrible pride at the power of what I can do.

Again that half-moment delay, that temporal stutter. Eyes wide, face twisted in alarm, just as I picture him doing in my mind, the sheriff draws his sidearm.

In my mind he places the sidearm to his temple.

Onscreen he places the sidearm to his temple.

He pauses. The moment stretches. Stretches.

In my mind he stops talking.

Dervishness then, confusion everywhere, as deputies rush in to scoop the sheriff up and bear him away.

I reached out to turn off the TV with hands shaking. Didn't sleep that night or for many nights to follow. Hardly left the apartment. Closed the door on what had happened, on what I could do, and have kept it shut, though every day when I turn the TV on, read the news, look around me at the mess of things, it gets harder. I answer the phone when calls come in, I go play my music, I come home. I keep my head down. I try real hard not to see things in my mind.

Mark Twain said a gentleman is someone who can play the banjo and doesn't.

So far, I've stayed a gentleman.

Daisy

By Eleanor Arnason | 5628 words

In her Tiptree Award-winning novel, A Woman of the Iron People, Eleanor Arnason explored first contact between humans and an intelligent alien species on a planet far from Earth, and whether or not it was right for humans to intervene. This next story considers similar themes, but this time much closer to home.

I MET ART PANCAKES AT THE Downtown Café. He was at the back in a corner booth, two big men standing nearby. Their hands were in their overcoat pockets, and their mouths were shut. They watched me as I went by.

Art was eating pancakes, his favorite food, cutting neat pieces in the three-level stack with a big fork and shoveling them in like an old-time fireman shoveling coal into an engine. There was a napkin tucked under his chin to catch drops of syrup and melted butter.

He looked at me, his fork paused midway to his mouth. "You Olson?"

"Yes."

I waited for him to say I was prettier than the average private eye, but he merely nodded. "Sit down."

I sat. A nervous looking waitress brought me a cup of coffee. I let it rest in front of me. Art finished lifting the fork to his mouth, then chewed and set the fork down. "You have a good rep. You do the job and keep your trap shut."

I nodded.

"I want you to find Daisy. Someone stole her."

"Have you considered calling the police? Kidnapping is a federal crime."

"First of all, I don't like the cops. Second, Daisy is a Pacific Giant Octopus, full grown." He took out a hundred dollar bill and slid it over. "You used to be a lawyer."

"It's a depressing line of work."

"Worse than being a private eye?"

I shrugged.

"Anyway, I checked. You can still practice. I'm putting you on retainer. Everything from here on is confidential."

I took the bill. "If I don't want the job, I'll still keep this, so I can say you're my client."

"Okay. I went in yesterday, and her tank was empty, and there was a body on the floor: Bergman, my assistant bookkeeper. Someone killed him and took Daisy. Losing him was no big deal, but I want Daisy back."

"Where is Bergman now?" I asked.

"Where he's never going to be found. Skip him. Concentrate on the octopus."

"Do you have any idea why anyone would want Daisy?"

"An aquarium might, but they don't usually employ hit men. She's important to me, Olson. Get her back quickly and in good condition, and I'll pay you twenty grand."

Good money, coming at the right time. My bank account was almost empty, and I'd been wondering if I should give up my office. "I'll do it. I'd like to see the scene of the crime."

"Come by my place this afternoon." Art pulled the napkin out from under his chin and used it to wipe his mouth. "Put it on my tab," he said to the nervous-looking waitress.

He left, trailed by his two goons. I drank my coffee, which was not good.

Art's cover was an art supply store at the edge of downtown. I knew artists who said it couldn't be beat for good prices and a large inventory. His real business—loan sharking and drugs—happened off the premises. The loan shark customers were middle class mostly, small business owners who'd gotten into trouble and couldn't get a loan from a bank. The drug customers were high end. Art provided good stuff to people who didn't want inner-city riffraff anywhere near them.

The cops knew about him, of course. But the ones who weren't on the take didn't want a fight with the crooked cops, and he'd always been smart enough to stay out of real trouble. A dead bookkeeper might count as real trouble, if the body surfaced, but I didn't think it would.

His office was in the back of the store, a big room with an oriental rug on the floor and Picasso etchings on the walls. The desk was Danish modern from the mid-twentieth century, a huge hunk of teak with elegant lines. Art stood up as I came in and gestured toward a door. "Here."

Beyond the door was another big room, this one half-filled by a tank twice as big as the desk. There was a pot big enough to hold a small tree lying on its side in one corner of the tank. Brightly colored flowers covered the exterior, and the interior was deep blue. The pot was empty. Plastic toys lay scattered on the tank's bottom. Most looked like puzzles, though there was a green kid's abacus.

"Octopuses like a place to hide," Art said, waving at the pot. "They're vulnerable. A mollusk without a shell. That pot is Daisy's shell."

"And the toys?" I asked.

"They get bored easily. Then they get depressed. You have to entertain them."

Other than the tank, the room was empty, except for a desk with a new PC on it. The desk was a lot smaller than Art's Danish monument, and it didn't look Danish, though it did look solid. Oak and early twentieth-century Mission style, I figured. For a gangster, Art had good taste.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Bergman's work station. His body was behind it."

I walked around the desk and looked. There was nothing there now.

"You put him in a room with an octopus?"

"Why not? Daisy was in a tank. It gave her something to watch. I'm not kidding about octopuses and boredom."

"How was he killed?"

"There used to be a paperweight on the desk. A glass globe, very high quality. Daisy liked to handle it, but it was too expensive to leave in her tank. Whoever it was used the paperweight to bash in Bergman's head. No loss. He wasn't much of a bookkeeper."

"Where is the paperweight now?"

"Gone," said Art firmly.

I figured it ended up wherever Bergman was.

I left after that and went to my office: a room in a shared office suite. There was a lock on the door, and it was more affordable than an office of my own. The other tenants had been curious at first, but I told them private detectives spent most of their time doing record searches, either hunched over computers or at county courthouses. It wasn't exciting. I didn't carry a gun and I didn't have a sexy assistant, female or male. I did have a bottle of whiskey in my desk. I didn't mention the last.

I went in the room and locked the door, then turned on my computer and did a search on octopuses. Outside my office window, a pair of pigeons made grumbling noises. Life is hard all over.

It turned out octopuses were complicated and interesting animals, though I couldn't see why anyone would kidnap one.

Art had given me a cell phone number. I called him and said, "Have you gotten a ransom note?"

"Hell, no. I wouldna have called you in if I coulda bought her back."

"How old is Daisy?"

"Four years. That's an estimate."

I thanked him and punched end, then called O'Leary. He was an honest cop, though he wasn't going to endanger his friendships on the force by making an issue about honesty.

"If anything comes up that looks connected to Art Pancakes, tell me, will you?"

"Why'd ya ask?"

"I'm doing a job for Art."

"He's a nasty man, Emily. Don't get mixed up with him."

"I'm trying to track down his pet octopus. Someone stole it."

"His what?"

"Pet octopus."

There was a silence, then a choking sound, O'Leary trying not to laugh. Finally, he said, "Okay. We do have something. A guy named Docker. A two-bit thug who used to hang at the edge of Art's mob. His body turned up last night on Highway Ten, shot, the gun beside his body. It was his gun. No prints. We found his car a few miles down the pike with a burnt out transmission. Someone didn't know how to drive a manual."

"When?"

"Did we find him? Last night."

Twenty hours ago.

"Which direction was the car going?"

"Toward the ocean," O'Leary said.

I asked him for the exact location. He gave it to me and added, "Most likely Art had it done, and that means we won't find the hitman. Art's people do good work. You don't want to mix with him."

"All I'm doing is looking for the octopus."

There was another stifled laugh. I said thanks, hit end, and pulled the bottle out of my desk drawer. Thinking made me anxious, but I needed to do some. I poured out a shot.

The pigeons still grumbled. Maybe they could use a drink. They weren't getting any of mine. I drank the shot, wondering what kind of nut would steal an octopus and why. If it had been Docker, where was the octopus now? The cops hadn't found her. The liquor warmed my mouth and throat.

After that I locked up my office and went home. Rain was falling, light and steady. God knew we needed it. I collected wet weather gear—a Filson lightweight cruiser jacket with soy wax waterproofing—and tucked a field notebook with waterproof pages in one pocket, along with a Fisher space pen. Mostly these were for birding, but I sometimes did stakeouts. A tablet was useless in a night stakeout. People noticed when a blue light was shining out of a dark parked car.

After that, I drove down Highway Ten. The road in front of me shone black. I wanted a cigarette, but I had given them up when I gave up the law. I gained fifteen pounds then, which meant my lawyer suits no longer fit. I couldn't go back.

When I got to the location O'Leary had given me, I stopped the car and got out. The soil here was sandy, and there was scrub brush. A few pieces of yellow police tape hung on branches and fluttered in the wind, and there was a trampled area next to the shoulder. Many large cop feet. A wind blew off the ocean. The air was cold, full of tiny drops of rain, and smelled of salt water.

Between the late afternoon light and the rain, it was hard to see much of anything. I pulled out the flashlight in my glove compartment—never go anywhere without a flash—and walked into the brush. The footprints went a short distance in, going in circles. The cops weren't looking that hard.

I went beyond the cop prints into the brush and found nothing. The person who wrecked the car hadn't left in this direction. Most likely he had walked along the shoulder. If he'd stolen Daisy, he had to have been carrying a tank full of salt water. Octopuses could survive for "an extended period" out of salt water, according to one website I'd found. But other sites told me the max was an hour. If Daisy had been out for twenty hours, she was dead. The rain might help a little. She wouldn't dehydrate. But she needed salt water to breathe.

I walked along the shoulder toward the ocean. At first I saw a few footprints in the soil next to the shoulder. The cops looking for evidence. Then those stopped.

Now and then a car passed, headlines on in the rain and dark. One pulled over, and a guy asked if I was okay.

"Something fell off my car," I said. "Don't worry. I'm fine."

The guy drove on. I kept going along the shoulder, playing my flash over the sandy soil and scrubby bushes. At last I found a place where the soil was compressed, making a faint trail that led into the scrubland. Something had been this way, though not something with feet. I followed the trail. It looked as if a single, wide, treadless wheel had rolled over the sand. Not a bike. The trail was way too wide. The cops must have missed it.

I came to the trail's end finally. The largest pickle jar I had ever seen stood upright under a bush. I knew it was a pickle jar, because the label was still on. But the pickles were gone. Instead, the jar was full of water and octopus. Dark brown arms with white suckers moved. Were they aerating the water? If so, it must be working. Daisy was alive.

The jar's top lay on the ground. There were air holes punched in it, though they didn't look big enough to keep the octopus in oxygen.

I tapped on the jar. The arms stopped moving. An eye swiveled and regarded me with a black, rectangular pupil.

"Can you hear me?" I asked.

An arm came out of the jar. It—and the entire octopus—had turned red, the color of interest and excitement.

"Lift your arm if you can understand me."

The arm's tip lifted.

That was a relief. Octopuses can hear, but their hearing range is not exactly the same as ours. I had pitched my voice high, to get closer to Daisy's natural range. Apparently it worked.

"Docker was taking you to the ocean, wasn't he? He had to be. Who else was stupid enough to transport an octopus in a pickle jar?"

The tip lifted again.

"I'll give you a ride there, but I need the answer to some questions."

Yes, the gesture said.

"Art had your tank in the same room as Bergman's computer. He was the assistant bookkeeper, though Art said he was no loss. If there's one thing a

crook needs, it's a good bookkeeper. Who was the main bookkeeper, the good one? I figure it was you."

The tip lifted.

"How?"

Daisy moved, lifting herself out of the pickle jar, which began to tilt. I steadied it. She slid onto the ground. Out of water and huddled, she didn't look big. She was still red—a good sign, I figured. The two slot-eyes regarded me. An arm waved, making a writing motion.

I pulled my notebook and pen out and handed them to Daisy. The octopus took both, put the notebook on the sandy ground and slowly, laboriously wrote. The letters were large and uneven, but they were obviously words, even upside down.

She turned the notebook around. I crouched down and read.

"Do you have a tablet?" the writing asked.

I did. Under the front seat of my car.

"Wait here, and remember that I'm your ride to the ocean." I went back for the tablet, bringing it to Daisy under her bush.

She was still holding the Fisher space pen. I put the tablet down in front of her, and she used the pen as a stylus.

I was crouched on wet ground in the rain, watching an octopus tap out a message on my tablet and feeling glad that the tablet had a waterproof case. This was not an ordinary situation.

"Art taught me counting games to keep me from getting bored," she wrote. "He likes numbers. Numbers always matter, he said. Then he told Bergman to teach me bookkeeping. It wasn't hard."

"And Bergman taught you English," I said.

The octopus tapped some more. Light as it was, the rain was getting me wet, but I stayed put and read.

"I learned most of it on my own."

"Smart, aren't you?" I said.

Daisy gave me a look that said "of course," then tapped again. "Bergman watched the internet when he should have been working. I learned English and a lot about the world. Octopuses are observant."

More tapping.

I read: "Art had me take over his books. He figured he was safe if his books were inside an octopus. How could I spill the beans? Or turn evidence? You can't put an octopus on a witness stand."

As far as I knew, this was true.

"It was interesting at first, but bookkeeping gets boring. I needed something new to do. I began embezzling. Stealing the money was no problem, but I needed a place to put the stolen money. I couldn't get a bank account on my own. I cut Bergman in, and he used Docker as his errand boy."

"Docker opened the bank account?"

The arm tip lifted, and I got a glimpse of white suckers. Daisy wrote, "Bergman thought it would be safer. He was worried about Art. Once the account was open, I could move money in. Opening was the problem."

There had to be a way to open accounts over the internet. But an octopus might not know this, and Bergman wasn't going to tell her.

"What did you need money for?" I asked.

"It was something to do," Daisy tapped.

"I wondered if your age had anything to do with it. Do you know how long your species lives?"

Daisy was motionless, regarding me with those strange rectangular pupils.

Finally she tapped, "Bergman watched National Geographic specials on his computer."

"Pacific Giant Octopuses live five years on the outside," I said. "You are reaching the end of your life. I'm willing to bet you didn't want to spend your sunset months doing bookkeeping for a gangster. You were planning an escape. But Bergman got in your way."

A long pause, while the octopus sat hunched. Finally, she wrote. "I learned what my lifespan was from one of the programs. I wanted to return to the ocean before I died."

"I couldn't get there on my own. I needed someone to take me. The only people I knew were in Art's organization. They had only one motivation. Money. I began stealing money because I was bored. Now I had a reason. I could use it to bribe Bergman."

I tried to imagine Daisy's conversations with Bergman. How does an octopus convince a bookkeeper to double-cross a gangster? She was a remarkable being.

"When I was ready to go, Bergman refused to cooperate. He wanted all the money I had embezzled, and he didn't want to cross Art. He said I would have to stay in the tank, a prisoner until I died."

Daisy stopped writing. I waited. Then the stylus moved again.

"He thought I was helpless. He knew I could live a while outside the tank. That's how I did the bookkeeping—working at his computer. But he thought he could lock me in the tank with no writing instrument, so I couldn't fink on him to Art."

"Who was going to do the bookkeeping?" I asked.

"Bergman thought he could." Her arm kept writing. "He didn't realize he wasn't good enough, and he didn't realize that we are famous for getting out of tanks. I picked the lock and climbed out while he was watching a National Geographic program on sharks, picked up the paperweight and hit him. He died."

"Did that bother you?"

The octopus tapped out two letters. "No."

She was a predator, and her blood was actually cold, as well as being copper-based and blue-green. How could she understand the value of human life? Anyway, Bergman sounded like a jerk.

After a moment, she wrote, "I pulled Bergman's body behind his desk, where Docker wouldn't see it, and texted Docker on Bergman's cell phone, telling him to collect me and carry me to the ocean. I told him to bring something to carry me in. Bergman had a stash of money in his desk. I had that to pay Docker. He came per instructions. The idiot brought a pickle jar. It was empty and he filled it with water from my tank, but it still tasted strange. I climbed in. He drove me toward the ocean. When we were part way there, he pulled over and called Bergman's cell phone. I don't know why. Maybe he had cold feet. Maybe he wanted more money. He got no reply.

"I was in the back seat, inside the jar. I unscrewed the lid while he was calling and climbed out.

"He took out his gun and turned around to shoot me. I was ready for him and pulled the gun out of his hand. It went off and killed him."

"Are you sure that was an accident?" I asked.

The octopus regarded me with slot eyes.

"You have a distributed nervous system, like an anarchist state," I said. "How do I know your arms didn't decide to kill Docker?"

"You don't. I don't," Daisy tapped in reply. "Only my arms know, and they are not talking. As it turned out, I couldn't drive Docker's car. I could hold the wheel and reach the pedals, but I didn't know how to shift."

"You burned out the transmission, climbed out and hid here."

Daisy waved a tentacle in agreement, then tapped, "I couldn't leave the jar behind. I put the lid on and rolled the jar along the highway, heading for the ocean. But cars kept passing, and I became afraid. I headed away from the highway, until I got here. I knew I needed to be back in salt water, so I climbed into the jar. It still had water, though I had lost some through the holes in the lid. Will you give me a ride to the ocean?"

Of course I would. I wasn't going to take the poor cephalopod back to a tank in the gangster's office. Back when I was a public defender, I had lost too many clients to the prison system. Yes, they had often done the crime, but no way did they deserve the time they got.

"Take me, and I will give you the money I have," Daisy wrote.

"I don't want it," I said. "Tell me where you've hidden the rest of Art's money."

"Why do you want to know?" Daisy tapped.

It was a slow and difficult conversation, spoken and written in the falling rain. But I was getting the information I wanted, and the Filson jacket (along with a Filson waterproof cap) was keeping me mostly dry. I should send the company a testimonial.

"Art wants you back, because you have the real books. If I can't give you to him, then I have to give him the accounting information. The balance sheet. The P&L. The bank account with the stolen money."

"When I get to the ocean," Daisy tapped.

This was the hard part. Even if the octopus looked like a sodden heap, she was big and powerful and had killed two men. Once we were in my car, Daisy could attack me. Pacific Giant Octopuses had an arm span of twelve feet, more than enough to reach me and strangle me. The arms were strong. Unlike Docker, I did not carry a gun. A person with a gun could end up like Docker.

The only thing that protected me was Daisy's inability to shift. I had an automatic. I hoped that Daisy didn't notice or didn't realize that she might be able to use it.

"Climb back in the jar," I said.

She gave me a look, then climbed. I screwed the lid on. The jar was too damn heavy for me to carry, so I rolled it to my car. I was just barely able to lift it into the passenger seat. I kept seeing Daisy's eyes, watching me warily. I fastened the jar in place with the seat belt, then went around to my side and climbed in. After a moment, Daisy unscrewed the lid. That made me nervous.

But maybe she needed the air. She couldn't be getting a lot of oxygen through the lid's air holes. Or maybe she was planning to kill me. Most likely she was smart enough to realize that was a poor plan.

I started the engine and headed for the ocean. The rain had picked up. My wipers moved quickly now. The octopus lifted her head, apparently watching the wipers.

"You have about a year to live," I said. "I figure you learned how an octopus spends the end of her life from a National Geographic program. She mates and lays her eggs and cares for them until they hatch. When they hatch, she dies."

An arm came out of the jar and waved in agreement.

"It's a hell of a life."

Daisy waved an arm again. Did that mean yes? The octopus was some kind of genius, and—as far as I could tell—all she wanted to do was breed and die. Life wasn't fair.

We reached a little port town with a public dock. Streetlights lit the almost empty streets. Dock lights shone above the warped planks of the dock. The rain was going to make the farmers very happy—and the homeowners, who hadn't been able to water their lawns for months.

I pulled up next to the dock, killed the engine and went around to open the passenger door. Daisy climbed out of the jar and down onto the dock. I handed her my tablet. "The balance sheet, the P&L and the account where the money is hidden."

She tapped out the information.

"Thanks," I said. "Good luck."

A pair of arms reached up and grabbed my wrist. They were so strong that I wasn't sure I could pull them off. I waited. The slot-eyes stared at me. Finally Daisy let go.

"Thanks," I said again.

She crawled—looking exhausted—to the dock's edge. For a moment, the octopus paused. Then she went over and was gone.

I looked at my wrist. Daisy's suckers had left red welts. Octopus hickeys, they were called by people who worked with octopuses. I had no idea why she grabbed me. To taste me? Octopuses could taste with their suckers. Or was it her way of saying thanks and good-bye?

I lifted the jar out and emptied it. I could dump it in a dumpster on the way out of town. As I put it back inside, I saw a wad of bills on the car seat.

She'd left Bergman's stash. She must have been carrying it under one of her arms, held by her suckers, which were flexible and strong and could move independently. They could hold the cash with no trouble.

I picked the wad and counted. Twenty one-hundred-dollar bills. Not as much as Art had offered me, but better than nothing. Not enough, I suspected, for Docker to finish the job. I had no idea what the gift meant. Was she grateful? Did she believe in paying for what she got? She was, after all, a bookkeeper. Maybe she simply had no more use for money.

I sat in the car for a while, watching the rain fall like a silver curtain in the dock lights.

All that intelligence in a being who was a solitary predator, never interacting with other members of her species except for a brief mating. After mating, she would find a den and lay her eggs, attaching them to den walls, then use her siphon to blow on the eggs, keeping them aerated. She would not leave to hunt and eat. I imagined her down in the cold, dark Pacific, growing thin and pale and in the end senile. By the time the eggs hatched, she would be dying.

Evolution was hell. I rubbed my wrist. Finally I drove home.

* * *

IT WAS THE FIRST real rain in six months and kept up all night. I woke several times and heard it. A reassuring sound, pattering on the roof above me, hitting my bedroom window. It was still falling in the morning. The red welts were still on my wrist, though fainter.

I got up and made coffee. My place was an upper duplex, and the living room windows opened onto a garden in back of the house. I looked down at the lovely, sodden mess the rain had made of plants and dirt and drank my coffee.

The problem was, I couldn't give Art Pancakes the numbers without telling him where I'd gotten them. That meant telling him I'd let Daisy go. He wasn't going to like that.

I had two choices: destroy the information I'd gotten from Daisy or give it to O'Leary. He might be able to use it to nail Art. But could I trust the cops?

O'Leary was okay, but I didn't like his buddies. If Art found out that I had turned him in, he'd come after me; and I'd be as dead as Bergman and Docker.

There was another choice. I was pretty sure I could get into Daisy's secret account. I could take the money in it and—do what? Flee to Costa Rica? The birding there was supposed to be fantastic. But the country was hot, and there were a lot of insects.

I didn't like heat or bugs. In addition, I wasn't a thief. Everyone should have things they won't do.

So I needed a story for Art, an explanation for why I couldn't find Daisy or work for him any longer. I'd be out twenty grand. It would be worth it to get away from Art. O'Leary was right. Don't work for big-time crooks.

I poured more coffee and sat down to think.

* * *

I saw Art Pancakes a day later. He was in his usual booth at the back of the Downtown Café, his two thugs standing nearby. There was a stack of pancakes in front of him, syrup dripping down the sides and pooling on the plate.

"Sit down," he said.

I did.

"Want anything to eat? Pancakes? It's real maple syrup."

"Just coffee."

He waved. The nervous waitress came over and took my order. He cut a wedge in the pancakes with his fork, then used the wedge to mop up syrup.

"What you got?"

"You know Docker is dead?"

"Shot. No loss."

"The cops think your guys did it."

"I wouldn't waste the bullets. I figure he shot himself."

"Why?"

"He was a loser. What did he have to live for? Who cares? What you got?"

"Not Daisy. A theory."

"I don't pay for theories."

The waitress put a cup in front of me, then scurried away. I took a sip. The coffee was still awful.

"Okay," Art said, working on another pancake wedge. "Tell me."

"You still haven't gotten a ransom note?"

He shook his head.

"You would have, if Daisy was being held for ransom; and I can't find any other way to make money off an octopus. There's a market for small octopuses, the ones that end in home aquariums. The public aquariums, the big places like Seattle and Monterey Bay, either catch their own animals or get them from other aquariums. They wouldn't be interested in Daisy in any case. She's too old. She would've died in another year."

"Yeah. I was worried about that. I'm going to have to get another octopus, and I'm not sure it's going to be as smart as Daisy." Art put the pancake wedge in his mouth and chewed.

"I don't think this is about Daisy," I said and felt nervous. I had just started lying to a very dangerous person. "I think Bergman was the target."

Art swallowed. "That loser? Why?"

"I'm not sure, but what do you think when something funny happens to a bookkeeper?"

Art paused midway through cutting another wedge. "The SOB was stealing."

"I figure someone wanted a cut, and Bergman wouldn't come through. Either the killer took Daisy as a distraction, to make it look like she was the target, or because she was a witness to the murder. Octopuses can recognize human faces. If they don't like someone, they use their siphons to shoot water at them."

"Yeah. I know. You sure you don't want pancakes? This syrup is terrific."

"No, thanks."

I paused, and he said, "Then?"

"What would Daisy do if someone put an arm in her tank?"

"Come over and grab the arm. She liked to taste people."

"The person—whoever he was—killed Bergman, then pulled Daisy out of the tank and held her till she stopped breathing. I don't know where her body is. Somewhere it won't be found."

"It would be hard. She was strong, and octopuses can live out of water a long time. A half hour or more."

"This is only a theory. I could be wrong."

"Docker was strong," Art said after a moment. "And dumb as a brick. I don't see him doing this on his own; and if he did it, why is he dead?"

"There might have been a third guy," I replied.

Art looked directly at me. I didn't believe in dead eyes, except in the heads of dead people, but Art had them. Dark and lifeless, as dull as stones. "Someone Daisy might see again," he said finally. "Someone in my organization."

By this time I was sweating. "You need a good accountant to go over your books, Art. That isn't my area of competence." I hesitated, then went on. "I think I've done everything I can for you. If it's someone in your organization, you'll have to find him on your own. There is no way I want to be poking around in the lives of your people."

"Yeah," Art said after a moment. "I don't want you poking around, either." He pulled his wallet out. "I'm giving you a grand for the theory. But that's it." He handed over a sheaf of bills. "If there is a third guy, I'll find him. Finding a good accountant is going to be harder."

I thought of making a joke about Robert Half, the big accounting temp agency, and then thought better of it. Art didn't look like a guy with much of a sense of humor.

"Go," he said and waved his hand.

I stood up. "Thanks for the money."

He went back to cutting the stack of cakes.

I walked past the two thugs and into the street. The air was cool. The overcast sky spit a few drops of rain. More rain was predicted over the next few days.

Maybe, if everything went right, Art would tear apart his organization looking for the third man, and the world would be a slightly better place. Or maybe not. I could live with either outcome, so long as I wasn't involved.

The only thing I had liked about this case was the octopus. She might be crooked and a killer, but how could one judge a creature like her? She wanted to break free from her prison and end her life in the traditional octopus fashion. How could I fault that?

Something else occurred to me as I climbed into my car. Funny I hadn't thought of it before. Daisy was a genius, and I had let her free in the ocean to breed. Octopuses don't learn from their parents, because their fathers die as soon as they mate, and their mothers die as soon as the babies hatch. But

what if Daisy's abilities were genetic? Did the world need super-smart octopuses who could learn English and do bookkeeping?

There was nothing I could do about that. I drove home.

Spacemail Only

By Ruth Berman | 60 words

The new commemoratives are
For Spacemail only.

The Postal Service
Promises delivery within the century
Within the sector,
Or they can scan and send at speed-of-light,
Not counting whatever delays
Your missive may encounter
At its planetary system of delivery.

Besides the coils of rockets,
They've issued many attractive
Sheets of sf writers,
And the more photogenic dwarf or giant stars.

Pen Pals Interplanetary will assign you
An alien friend,
If you want to write.

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

By Charles de Lint | 3361 words



Live Wire , by Amber Lynn Natusch, Amber Lynn Natusch, 2016, \$2.99.

Shadow Born , by Jasmine Walt and Rebecca Hamilton, Blue Bolt Publishing, 2016, \$2.99.

I LIKE commercial fiction.

Truth is, I like all kinds of fiction. What genre it fits into is pretty much irrelevant. So long as the premise/plot is intriguing and the characters believable, I'm there. Certainly, I'm drawn to prose that has something special about it—who doesn't appreciate having all their reading likes checked off with each book and story they start? But Story and Character are non-negotiable. If I want pure Style or Lyricism, I'll pick up a book of poetry (yes, I also like poetry, and add a number of new collections and anthologies to my library every year).

What I don't like is the term "guilty pleasure."

Mostly because it seems to presuppose that the material in question isn't particularly well-written, but somebody likes it anyway. With ebooks, these "guilty pleasures" can be read anywhere, since no one knows what you're reading. Before the proliferation of a digital delivery system for stories, I assume these sorts of books were read in the privacy of one's home when the rest of the family members had gone out or off to bed.

But why should anyone feel guilt over something that gives them pleasure (and no one is being hurt during the act, in this case, reading)? Even if a book isn't particularly well-written, I see no harm if it brings pleasure to the reader.

Yes, I can hear someone say, but by reading inferior books, aren't these readers missing the important, good, fill-in-your-own-adjective books?

Aren't they wasting their time?

Well, no. Because if they weren't reading these so-called guilty pleasures, there's a good chance they wouldn't be reading at all.

I bring all this up because I know there are many people who equate commercial fiction with guilty pleasure, and I take exception to the pejorative tone of the assumption, because there's nothing wrong with commercial or popular fiction. I can see how subjectively someone might take that stand, but then what they forget is that point of view is subjective and not necessarily true for another.

But it's not something you can argue, because when someone is set in their assumptions, you can't win the argument anyway. It reminds me of the old joke where a situation of this kind is likened to playing chess with a pigeon. The pigeon will knock over the pieces, poop on the board, and then stalk off certain that they've won the game.

The two books under discussion—finally!—are prime examples of good commercial fiction. They have strong lead characters and play with the current tropes of urban fantasy, but most importantly, they're entertaining. The authors know how to start a story, and they pull the reader to the finish with the sheer exuberance of their characters and plots.

In *Live Wire* by Amber Lynn Natusch, we're introduced to Sapphira, a member of "Patrons Ceteri, or PC, an organization of supernatural warriors bred and bound to keep the balance between the human and not-so-human worlds." She should be working with her family, but two years before the book opens, she was the cause of the worst single most devastating supernatural event in history. A whole town paid the price and she has no idea how it happened, only that she was to blame.

Her family keeps her under close protection—and supervision—to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again.

So far, *Live Wire* doesn't stray from the usual tropes. Sapphira comes across as surly and somewhat unlikeable. But after a few chapters of meaningless binge sex and drinking, with a dash of hard exercise (all of which keeps the demon inside her at bay), a plane carrying Sapphira crashes in a freak storm and she awakes in a corn field with no memory of who she is.

It's at that point that the novel begins to sing.

I'll admit I almost didn't reach that point because *Live Wire* was feeling pretty much same-old, same-old. But I'm glad I stuck with it, and when I got

to her amnesia and the mysteries of the farm where she spends her recovery time, I realized how necessary those early chapters were to show the contrast of who she really is without the baggage she's had to carry for the past couple of years.

It's not so much a coming of age novel as a book about the discovery of one's true self. There's plenty of action sprinkled throughout, and especially at the end, but what I took away from the novel was Sapphira's character arc and what a delight it was to see her change, grow, and find a certain peace with who she is.

Shadow Born by Jasmine Walt and Rebecca Hamilton also starts with some familiar tropes of current urban fantasy. Here we meet Detective Brooke Chandler, who has the ability to view events from the past by tapping into the residue memory of inanimate objects. She's based in Chicago, where she and her partner/fiancé Tom have been dealing with the vampires who have overrun the city.

When the novel opens, Chandler's on her way to a new job with the Salem Police Department, where she hopes to use her ability to find out the truth behind Tom's death. Tom died in a mysterious fire while on loan to the same department. The Salem P.D. proves to be a dead end—she can't even get the case files she needs to start the investigation—and she discovers that the supernatural community is much larger than the vampires she dealt with back in Chicago.

Her poking around into Tom's death soon has her on the wrong end of a number of assassination attempts and brings her to the attention of a local fae club owner who promises to help her discover the truth about Tom if she'll help him in turn.

As you'd expect, things get worse and more complicated long before they can even start to get better.

What sets *Shadow Born* apart from the pack is that for all the familiar elements, the authors still manage to imbue characters and plot with a freshness that keeps even jaded readers like me interested.

* * *

Drawing Dead , by Andrew Vachss, Vintage Crime, 2016, \$15.

Another Chance to Get It Right: Fourth Edition , by Andrew Vachss and Geof Darrow, Dark Horse Books, 2016, \$14.99.

It seems each of the last few columns has covered at least one pretty dark book. We looked at Richard Kadrey's *Sandman Slim* last time out. Before that it was a couple of books by R. S. Belcher. Today it's the latest in Andrew Vachss's Cross series.

Vachss is best known for his dark crime/mystery novels, the most popular of which are in the Burke series. But while there's an element of traditional (and certainly Vachss's unique take on) hardboiled mystery in *Drawing Dead* , and it's published by Vintage Crime, a house well-known for its mystery books, I'd consider it more of a supernatural/sf thriller with a touch of Cthulhu on steroids.

The Burke and Cross series have some similarities. Both are written in a tough, hardboiled voice, and center around families of choice living off the grid. Burke and Cross grew up raised by the state, spending much of the early parts of their lives incarcerated. But where Burke's crew focuses its attention on predatory pedophiles, Cross's crew are pure mercenaries.

Cross's crew operates in Chicago. They're the most feared of the city's criminal organizations, so it makes no sense when someone attempts a hit on one of them. Who'd be that foolish? The answer has its roots in earlier books in the series, but new readers shouldn't be worried, since we're kept up to date through flashbacks and the like.

I'm not going to get into the supernatural elements of the novel—it's complicated, and we don't have the room here—but it's a fascinating take and permeates every part of the story.

What draws me to Vachss's work—beyond the fact that his books are addictively readable—is the loyalty of the characters to one another. In a time where friendships are so often only on social media and easily discarded, it's refreshing to be reminded of the depth that these sorts of relationships can actually have.

And now, as Monty Python would say, for something completely different.

I can't imagine Oprah reading the Cross series, but back in the 1990s she read a passage from *Another Chance to Get It Right* during an interview she was conducting with Vachss, and the book hasn't been out of print since then.

She was, as were so many others, enthralled with this collection of original stories, poetry, and allegory, combined with the gorgeous black & white art by Geof Darrow and others, all of it celebrating the potential of parenting.

The rights and protection of kids is a theme that runs through most of Vachss's books, but this is as clear a mission statement as you're going to get from the author, filled with beauty and despair, sadness and hope. It should be required reading for every new parent. It should be required reading for anybody who cares about kids and cares for kids. Andrew deserves our thanks for writing this book.

This twenty-fifth anniversary edition features a new cover by Darrow and other new material, but the core thrust remains the same as when it was first published.

Highly recommended.

* * *

The Darkest Thread , by Jen Blood, Adian Press, 2016, \$14.95.

I like a good mystery, and *The Darkest Thread* certainly fits the bill, but the reason I'm bringing it up in this column is that I've noticed something of interest that seems to show up more and more these days—not only in fiction, but also in films and on TV—and that's how you can't turn around without bumping into supernatural elements in unexpected places.

Jen Blood is best known for her Erin Solomon mystery series, which I haven't read, but I'm guessing that it also has a touch of the supernatural in it, since the main character of *The Darkest Thread* was originally introduced there.

Jamie Flint runs a K-9 service, and in this new book she, her son Bear, and their friend Ren are called in to find a pair of teenage girls who have gone missing in the "Bennington Triangle" of Vermont, a heavily forested area renowned for its disappearances and strange occurrences over the past hundred years. The weather is terrible—pounding rain—and the terrain is rough. The search is also hampered by the presence of the girls' survivalist family, who resent the presence of law enforcement on their land—even though these same police and FBI are there to help find the girls.

The twist is that Jamie can hear the voices of ghosts. If that's not enough, her son Bear can both hear and see them. And there are plenty of ghosts in the Bennington Triangle.

The supernatural element doesn't solve the mystery of the missing girls, but it adds a depth to the storyline and the characterization that I really liked. That said, I should warn you this is still written as a mystery, not a fantasy. I loved it, but then I read in both genres. Still, if you're a dog lover, or just someone who appreciates a tantalizing puzzle as well written as *The Darkest Thread*, you might come away as I did with the determination to go track down Blood's other books.

* * *

The Sun, the Moon, and Maybe the Trains, by Rodney Jones, Red Adept Publishing, 2012, \$12.99.

All the Butterflies in the World, by Rodney Jones, Red Adept Publishing, 2014, \$15.99.

Here's one of my favorite things about the arts: how the communication between creator and recipient is timeless. If you're unfamiliar with van Gogh, the Pre-Raphaelites, Banksy, when you view their work, you're no different from those who viewed it when it was first shown. You get that same buzz of being in the presence of something special you haven't been exposed to before. It's the same for the first time you hear Mozart, Dylan, or Miles Davis, when you first read Dickens, Stephen King, or Alice Hoffman. These may be classic and in some cases long-dead artists, but when you first experience their work, it's always new to you, as though it was just released.

And living when we do now, with the internet at our fingertips, access to the past—both recent and distant—has never been easier.

I mention all of this not because I think Rodney Jones is in the genius class of those mentioned above but because, although these two books of his are a few years old, they were still new to me. And possibly to you, as well. But that in no way detracts from their appeal. (And considering that they're a

pair of time-traveling stories, maybe the sense of when they're set is rather beyond the point anyway.)

In *The Sun, the Moon, and Maybe the Trains* , we're introduced to John Bartley, who lives a hundred and thirty-four years in Tess's past. Author Rodney Jones does an excellent job of depicting John's rural life in the 1800s over the course of the first few chapters, but that's hardly material for this column. Things get interesting when John stumbles from his own time into the year 2009 when Tess lives.

I was absolutely charmed with these two characters. I realize this kind of fish out of water story isn't new, but the way Jones shows us John's reactions to everything that's changed since 1875 makes the whole concept feel fresh. John slowly comes to terms with the modern world, just as Tess—who finds herself in the position of being his guide—comes to believe that John is really from when he says he is.

I don't want to get into too much more detail for fear of spoiling the story for you. But if you like time travel—as I do—and can appreciate stories that are told on a smaller scale than the fate of the entire world, I think you'll be just as charmed as I was with both books.

Jones isn't a genre writer, so he comes to this trope of our field with a different take. He doesn't try to come up with an snial explanation for what's happened to John. Instead he focuses on the characters, and it's because of their voices—the first-person point of view shifts between the characters over the course of the two books—that we're drawn in and so charmed.

Try the first book, but I should warn you that the pair of titles makes up one story.

Recommended.

* * *

Staked , by Kevin Hearne, Del Rey, 2016, \$27.

Oberon's Meaty Mysteries: The Purloined Poodle , by Kevin Hearne, Subterranean Press, 2016, \$20.

I was quite taken with Kevin Hearne's Iron Druid books when I first started the series. Its main charm for me was how it chronicled the life of Atticus, a two-thousand-year-old Druid, interacting with life in the twenty-first century. The focus was on Atticus and his wolfhound Oberon (with whom he can communicate mentally), and I really liked all the little details of their interactions with their community and the struggle to keep everyone from knowing how old Atticus really is, how the two can communicate with one another, and that magic is real.

But over the course of the series the cast has continued to grow, the stories kept getting bigger, and I didn't feel as compelled to read each new book as it came out.

Don't get me wrong. The writing and dialogue has remained top-notch throughout. The problem was my expectations, not Hearne's abilities.

When *Staked* came out, I was a few books behind. I decided to catch up, and grew to appreciate the extra first-person points of view from Atticus's apprentice Druid and lover Granuaile, as well as from his archdruid Owen who was frozen in time on a mystical island until finally being freed a couple of books ago. And while I wasn't thrilled with so much of the big action involving wars between rival gods, there were enough more grounded scenes to keep me interested.

If you're like me when it comes to a long-running series (*Staked* is book eight with a number of novellas bridging between the books), you can lose track of some of the finer details of ongoing plots. Happily, Hearne not only offers a pronunciation guide as part of the novel's front matter, but also a "The Story So Far," which is something I wish all authors would do for series books.

It doesn't give you all the nuances of what has happened before, but enough of the broad strokes so that you're quickly brought up to speed. And it makes a great entry point for new readers.

Staked still has a biggish story—Atticus is determined to rid the world of vampires who are responsible for his being the last Druid for the past couple of thousand years—but it doesn't have the large sweep of the last few books. It is in fact three stories, one from each of the Druids' points of view.

Granuaile is concentrating on confronting demons from her past—her nasty stepfather and the more recent altercation she had with the god Loki who, through a mark burned onto her skin, can track her no matter where she goes.

Owen is opening a Druid school for the children of werewolves, giving them a way into their parents' magical lives.

Atticus and Oberon are dealing with the vampires.

For most of the book, the characters are quite separate from one another, and I, for one, appreciated the scaling down of their individual storylines. And they do all come together at the end to deal with Atticus's problem.

I've mentioned Oberon, the wolfhound, above. *Oberon's Meaty Mysteries: The Purloined Poodle* is told from his point of view as he and Atticus investigate a rash of kidnapped purebred dogs. Considering that Oberon gets a lot of the best lines in the Iron Druid series, you won't be surprised at the light tone of this story.

Everything's here that I loved from the first of the Iron Druid books. It's a more intimate story and Atticus's magic is used to deal with everyday problems rather than taking on pantheons of gods. It's a delight from start to finish, and if you think it might be a bit twee to have the story told from a dog's point of view, I can assure you that it's actually very entertaining and even a little ribald in places.

I mean, he's a dog. Think of the things that a dog likes to do.

Both books are very satisfying. I've heard that the next Iron Druid will be the last in the series, and I find myself eagerly looking forward to it, as well as Hearne's first foray into secondary world fantasy, which apparently is also in the works.

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Spectrum 23: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art , by John Fleskes, editor, Flesk Publications, 2016, \$45.

I'm really grateful for books such as *Spectrum 23* . With the incredible profusion of art and story available to us these days, it's very useful to have some curated guides to each year's best, because it's impossible to keep up with it all on one's own.

Yes, books such as this or *The Year's Best SF* miss worthy entries and will include others that don't appeal to us so much. But whether the material is chosen by individuals (like Gardner Dozois or Ellen Datlow) or by a jury

of peers (as happens with *Spectrum* or the Nebula anthology series), the end result invariably has far more hits than misses.

Spectrum is always a particular delight. In it you find representations of every kind of fantasy and sf art you might imagine, culled from book covers, film concept art, comics, advertising, sculpture, and there's even a section of previously unpublished work. There are a handful of artist profiles chosen from each category as well as those focusing on the five-person jury who selected the work.

The production values are excellent. The wealth of material is impressive—over 500 reproductions (many of them full-page) by almost 300 different artists. I find myself spending hours poring over all of the gorgeous art whenever I get a new entry in the series, and this one proved no different.

If you have any interest in the art of our field, this is the book for you. And if you don't find work you love in these pages, honestly, I'd be very surprised.

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Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. EBooks may be sent as an attachment to cdelint@gmail.com.

MUSING ON BOOKS

By Michelle West | 3002 words



Death's End, by Cixin Liu, translated by Ken Liu, Tor Books, 2016, \$26.99.

The House of Binding Thorns, by Aliette de Bodard, Ace Books, 2017, \$27.

Summerlong, by Peter S. Beagle, Tachyon Publications, 2016, \$15.95.

The Starlit Wood: New Fairy Tales, edited by Dominik Parisien and Navah Wolfe, Saga Press, 2016, \$25.99.

I WRITE THIS in November of 2016.

I write this after the election. The U.S. election. I am not American, but the U.S. election has always drawn the eyes of the rest of the world. If one knows nothing at all about politics, one still knows who the leader of the U.S. is: the leader of the free world.

I write this after the emergence of neo-Nazis, swastikas left as evidence of their jubilation, their certainty that now, *now*, it is safe and even acceptable for them to declare themselves.

I write this in the beginning of the aftermath, in the wake of open discussions about Muslim registries and the existence of Japanese internment camps as a legal *precedent* for their existence.

I miss a deadline, because a review column is predicated on reading, on writing, and I have bounced off almost every word that others have written—all of those words written in a world before sexual assault and racism were *acceptable* in the highest office in the U.S.—and tripped over sentences of my own. I am gripped by the certainty that somehow, we have failed. We?

Yes.

In a world like this, reading—and writing—genre novels has felt almost trivial, unacceptable. The motors of my mind are turning, turning, turning, and it has been hard to feed them anything.

* * *

Perhaps because of this frame of mind, *Death's End* speaks to me. It is not particularly escapist, and on the surface, seems to more than imply that humanitarian concerns—freedom, love—are not only effeminate, but are tantamount to genocide. Or rather, humanity's suicide.

Let me back up. *Death's End* is the third of three novels that form a trilogy. The first, Hugo winner *The Three-Body Problem*, posited first contact with an alien race. It was both sf and a mystery in a near future setting. It took Stephen Hawking's stance that alien visitation, alien *attention*, might well be a very bad thing for us, and ran with it. Given Liu's sf, I think it impossible that he was not aware of Hawking's views.

At the end of *The Three-Body Problem*—and if you have not read the book, stop here unless you are not spoiler adverse—humanity is faced with a seemingly hopeless future: the Trisolarans are coming to invade our world because their own was mostly destroyed in early wars and they need a new place to live (it's a bit more complicated than that, obviously, but that's what it breaks down to). They will reach the Earth in four hundred years. They can see everything we do, hear everything we say, and inhibit the research that might—just might—prepare us to meet them head on.

They cannot, however, hear what we think. On their side are the people who have been hurt and damaged and isolated enough that they welcome the destruction of humanity. To those people, the Trisolarans are almost literally gods, and their devotion is religious. They are not, however, stupid. To counter the Trisolarans, a very odd project is put in place: the Wallfacer project. A handful of men are chosen who are given resources and set the task of coming up with a strategy that will preserve humanity in the four centuries to come. They cannot speak of what they are doing; the Trisolarans cannot read human thoughts.

They can, however, read each other's. The idea that thought and speech are not the same is the cultural pivot around which the survival of humanity depends.

Luo Ji is the Wallfacer who succeeds. He succeeds because he understands the nature of the universe: It is a dark forest in which predators will destroy whatever prey they can see. It has happened before. It will happen again. Humanity's tech level has been below the radar, as it were, and the Trisolaran tech level is not—but the Trisolarans are hiding from predators. Their fear of predators is stronger than their fear of anything humanity might do—with cause. Luo Ji transmits coordinates for a solar system into the black unknown—and that solar system is utterly destroyed.

Now, there is leverage. Now there is a reason that the Trisolarans must accommodate human demands and negotiate with humanity. If they are unwilling, Luo Ji will press the button that will transmit the coordinates of the Trisolaran world into the ether. Yes, it will more than likely kill humanity as well, because our solar system is too close to the Trisolaran home world and might well be noticed—but that is a risk he is willing to take in the ultimate breakdown of negotiations.

* * *

Death's End begins, oddly enough, at the same time as *The Dark Forest*, the second book in the trilogy. Yun Tianming is a young man who has been diagnosed with cancer. He is undergoing chemo in a hospital when a new law emerges from an international council: the euthanasia law. It allows for the legal termination of life for those who are terminally ill. He is not close to his family, although his father is paying his medical bills; he has not been successful enough on his own to afford them himself. He doesn't own a house; he lives in a company dorm. He has very few friends—in fact, one—and no wife. He is a drain on his family's resources, his sister's future, and he decides he will die, taking advantage of that law, because he understands that's what his sister wants, and he can accept that.

He has been in love with one woman he met in university, and because death approaches, he has been thinking of her. They talked alone together once, just once, but she was sunlight to him, a warmth of presence that the

rest of his life lacked. He never confessed, never made it clear—one doesn't propose to the sun, after all. But he wanted to be in her orbit while he could. She was successful, friendly, involved with people; he was not.

The one friend he does have, however, has taken an idea from college, given him by Tianming, and become rich; he gives some of the money he has made to Tianming. He has more money than he has ever had, he is about to die, and he does not wish to leave that money to the sister who wanted him dead, so his thoughts turn to Cheng Xin. He decides to buy her a star. It will be an anonymous gift. He wants no sense of obligation to fall on her.

And then, she arrives just before he is euthanized, and asks him to do worse than die, for the sake of humanity.

And, bitterly, he agrees.

* * *

There are many ways to read the book that follows. Cheng Xin *is* the person he loved: she is warmth. She is sunlight. She is caring. She is brilliant. Had she not been these things, she would never have reached him. She interacted with him because, in some ways, she thought of him as a child—an unhappy, frightened child—and it was in her to include him, to speak to him, to try to bring him into a social orbit.

Were she not that person, the book as it exists could not unfold as it does. But it is also clear that those traits bring humanity to the brink of extinction; that it is her ethics, her inability to consider genocide, that causes the near fall of her kind.

On the surface—or perhaps only a smidge below it—Liu seems to be arguing that in a dark forest, we *need* wolves. The least likable man in the entire novel, Wade, is right, most of the time. There is literally nothing he will not countenance in pursuit of his goals. He will, without second thought, sacrifice everything, anything.

And yet, balanced against this, the tiny story of Tianming and Cheng Xin, without which there would be no right decisions to be made; had she been Wade, there would be no story.

* * *

Liu is not the most subtle of writers. His characters are not complex enough to be real to me. But in execution, *Death's End* is classic sf; it is packed full of ideas and the consequences of those ideas play out for the length of the book, gaining momentum until the end. It is both comfortable and disturbing, the familiar in service to the new. I could not put it down, even when I was shouting at it; at no point did I want to give up.

Like it or hate it, it won't bore you.

* * *

Aliette de Bodard is French. She writes in English. I've been asked about this in the bookstore where I work because some people prefer not to read in translation when they have the linguistic option to read the original, so: Her books are not translated from the French.

That out of the way, *The House of Binding Thorns* is the sequel to *The House of Shattered Wings*. I believe it was written so that it could stand alone, but I really, really suggest reading *The House of Shattered Wings* before you read this book; otherwise some of the emotional weight of the complicated ending will be lost. The story itself makes sense, but story often does; it's the weight of what comes before that gives it resonance.

Madeleine is an addict. She has spent twenty years of her mortal life in House Silverspires; before that, she was a child and a dependent of House Hawthorn. She escaped in the aftermath of a bloody takeover, wounded and broken in so many ways, and she took refuge in two things: Silverspires and addiction. Angel Dust destroys the addict, but it provides a heroin-like high. Madeleine is willing to ride that high until it kills her, because she is not afraid of death. She is afraid of pain.

And Asmodeus, the Fallen head of House Hawthorn, is the center of that fear. He never lets go of what is his, and Madeleine is Hawthorn's. But she is not useful to him as an addict. No one in the House has ever kicked that addiction, but if self-respect isn't enough of a spur, fear is. To give in is to face Asmodeus the torturer. He makes this clear. And he makes clear, as

well, that she has never escaped, not truly; she is trapped, and was, even in Silverspires, by the fear he engendered.

She doesn't know what he wants or expects from her; she is too terrified not to attempt to give it. There is no escape from Hawthorn.

What he appears to want is her skills as an alchemist—and she's not the best House alchemist—on a diplomatic mission, to treat with the Hidden Kingdom that lives beneath the waters of the Seine. This makes no sense to her, but as Asmodeus says, she is pathetic at intrigue. She goes with Clothilde, and the resurrected Fallen Elphon, whose memories are lost upon return, and whose death haunts her still.

Asmodeus is in search of a bride. Or a spouse. He will be affianced, as a political maneuver, to a prince of the Hidden Kingdom. The Hidden Kingdom is being destroyed by Angel Dust, hollowed out and rotted by the addiction, and there are factions within that Kingdom that hate the Fallen, for the wars of the Fallen have harmed them immeasurably.

And yet, necessity dictates alliance.

In order to ascertain what Asmodeus really wants, a spy, Thuan, is sent to House Hawthorn—a young man in appearance. He is in the Hawthorn school, and should he excel there, he will become a true dependent of the House, something any Houseless person wants; the House is not a guarantee of safety, but being Houseless poor is almost a guarantee of either starvation or death. He is a prince of the Hidden Kingdom; starvation is not his concern. Asmodeus is.

And well he should be.

Phillipe is the last strand of a complex web. He is Houseless, hiding in the streets of the city, and plying his trade as a doctor to the Houseless. He is not mortal, but immortal. He has suffered at the hands of the Houses and their war. In the near destruction of House Silverspires, he lost someone he had grown, in the fashion of the cautious and the despairing, to love. He promised her that he would resurrect her somehow, because he knows it can be done.

But it cannot be done with his magic, or the magic of his kind, and in the end, he must seek the Fallen. He is willing to risk this because the Fallen to whom he makes his request is Houseless, which is almost unthinkable for the Fallen. Berith lives with her mortal lover, Francoise; she is not without power, even given her status.

Madeline's, Thuan's and Phillipe's stories march inexorably toward death—the death of a House, the death of a love, the death of a race. De Bodard's

dominion of the Fallen is a grim world, a place in which lack of caution is rewarded by unpleasant death; where betrayal is a certainty, and loss as well. Politics and personality intertwine in complex ways; you can read the subtle strands of personal history in the way her characters interact, even when that history is never fully revealed.

Unlike Liu's, de Bodard's people feel real to me; this is not a complex philosophical essay. There is hope even in the darkest of places, and there is a desire for love, for trust, for harbor, that takes root no matter how often it's destroyed. This is a stronger, more certain novel than *The House of Shattered Wings*, and if reading it is sometimes walking the unfenced edge of a cliff, the vista is dizzying and beautiful. It is well worth the wait, and if you haven't read the first novel, I urge you to do so. But have *The House of Binding Thorns* in hand before you reach the end.

* * *

Peter S. Beagle has long written fantasy that's hard to pin down. There's nothing formulaic in his writing, and if elements of his books appear in other books, it's because the original works have sunk deep roots and flowered in the minds of readers who then become writers.

Summerlong is a short novel; it takes place over the course of less than a calendar year. Abe is a historian. Joanna, his partner, is a stewardess. They live together at Abe's place, but have never married, drifting into a relationship that's spanned two decades. Joanna's daughter, Lily, is the bane of her existence, and yet, in some ways, the center of it emotionally. Lily is unlucky in love, a fact that Abe accepts because he can't change it and that Joanna resents, largely because she's a mother, with a mother's sense of both responsibility and guilt.

When Abe and Joanna go out to dinner at one of their favorite restaurants, they meet Lioness, a new waitress, and they are both struck by her, both drawn to her. She is new in town and has no permanent place to stay, and Abe offers her their garage. Joanna is right behind him. But Lioness is not a normal runaway. She is not what they are, or even what they were in their youth, and her presence has consequences.

The book is slower, quieter, than either *Death's End* or *The House of Binding Thorns* ; the conflicts that arise are wed to a normal, quiet life. But there is magic in the world, with deep roots, ancient truths, none of which are mortal. No matter how mundane the setting, that magic is never mundane, and that's Beagle's gift: he doesn't privilege the wild and the ancient, any more than one might privilege the Grand Canyon: It exists, and it is larger and grander than mortals. We can touch it, approach it, and get lost in it—but if we cannot do it from a safe distance, it will change some part of our essential nature.

You can't jump off the cliffs of the Grand Canyon and fly.

This is a beautiful, quiet book, almost elegiac, about real people, real magic, and the cost of it. I wouldn't say it's surprising, because it's not the type of story that relies on those beats, but what Beagle does here, he does *well* .

Recommended.

* * *

I've always been a bit of a sucker for fairy tales. I don't know when that started, because I have no memory of both being a reader and not reading fairy tales. *The Starlit Wood* is an anthology of new fairy tales—which is to say, an anthology of retellings of old ones.

The table of contents alone reads like a who's who of fantasy authors, but reading a table of contents is almost beside the point. Suffice it to say that it contains new work by Seanan McGuire, Catherynne M. Valente, Naomi Novik, Garth Nix and more.

There are perhaps three stories that didn't work for me out of a total of eighteen, and when I say didn't work, I mean only that; I didn't think they were terrible, they were very well written—they just didn't speak to me. It's highly likely that they will work for other readers; the quality of the anthology in writing terms is very, very high.

I didn't expect the Daryl Gregory take on Hansel and Gretel, and am sorry to say that it made me inhale coffee, with predictable results. I loved the Amal El-Mohtar, which is much more traditional in tone. Stephen Graham

Jones's take on the Pied Piper is horror, pure and simple—but it would be, when seen from the eyes of modern-day parents.

I didn't actually spend very long on the table of contents because it gives away the story at the heart of the retelling—instead, I read the stories and tried to guess the inspiration. And I now have to go and find the original for the haunting and sad Aliette de Bodard tale, which I had not encountered before.

Highly recommended.

* * *

And this is the world. It is the day after. I have found my way back to reading, and reading shakes free the webs of despair, because that's the enemy here. It's the voice that says *there's nothing I can do* . There is always something that can be done.

SCIENCE

By Pat Murphy & Paul Doherty | 1399 words



ROBOTS IN YOUR PANTS

LAST month, we started a series of columns about robots—specifically, robots that don't fit neatly into the boxes defined by science fiction.

This month, we'll consider robots in your pants. No, not porn robots. Get your mind out of the gutter.

We're talking about robots you can wear—like the Mobile Infantry Power Suits of Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, Tony Stark's Ironman suit, the Caterpillar P-5000 Powered Work Loader that Ripley donned in *Alien*, or, our personal favorite, the wrong trousers in Nick Park's "The Wrong Trousers" with Wallace and Grommit. (And if you're going to argue that Wallace and Grommit are not science fiction, go find yourself another science column to read.)

We're talking about robots that are up close and personal, as close to you as your own skin. And they provide an excellent example of a future that could take a very different direction than the one envisioned by early sf.

MOTOR MONSTERS

As near as we can tell, the first sf featuring robotic exoskeletons was E. E. "Doc" Smith's 1937 Lensman series. But some actual inventions (or patents anyway) predated Smith's fictional representation by decades. In 1890, a Russian named Nicholas Yagn patented "new and useful Improvements in Apparatus for Facilitating Walking, Running, and Jumping" (<https://www.google.com/patents/US420179>). Yagn's invention used springs and compressed air to store and release energy. A few decades later, in 1919, a U.S. inventor named Leslie C. Kelley patented a "pedomotor" (<https://www.google.com/patents/US1308675>), a steam-powered apparatus

that used artificial ligaments arranged parallel with the major muscles of the legs to help a person run faster without getting tired.

But it was in the 1960's that exoskeleton development really hit its stride—right about the time that Marvel first featured Ironman in *Tales of Suspense* #39 (March 1963). That's when the U.S. military funded General Electric to develop the Hardiman exoskeleton suit (<http://www.gereports.com/post/78574114995/the-story-behind-the-real-iron-man-suit/>).

The Hardiman looked a bit like Ripley's Powered Work Loader. Big metal pinchers extended from the user's hands, metal mechanical legs were parallel to the user's legs. Wearing the Hardiman enabled a user to lift up to 1500 pounds.

That sounded pretty impressive until we found out the suit itself weighed 1500 pounds. Because of its size, weight, lack of stability, and battery issues, it never got past the prototype stage.

The Hardiman was just the beginning. Since then, the U.S. Military through Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) has regularly funded exoskeleton development. For those of you dreaming about jet packs or even the jump jets of Heinlein's Power Suits, keep on dreaming. These suits focus on more pedestrian challenges: giving people increased strength (lifting power) and endurance. Think augmented foot soldiers lugging heavy loads.

Berkeley Robotics and Human Engineering Laboratory developed Berkeley Lower Extremity Exoskeleton (BLEEX), which Pat argues is just a long-winded way of saying "motorized pants." Raytheon's XOS Exoskeleton is touted as letting one soldier do the work of three.

It would take too long to list all the exoskeletons of the "make me a superhero" variety that have been developed. They use motors, they use hydraulics, they are motorized pants, they are motorized suits. But they share some problems with each other, and with their ancestor, the GE Hardiman. They're heavy, their battery life is short, and they don't move in synchrony with the user. This last point is maybe the most important of the three.

IS IT A FIGHTING SUIT OR A SUIT YOU FIGHT?

Here's the deal. You don't want to spend your energy fighting with your fighting suit. But that's been a problem. In many cases, soldiers wearing these suits ended up expending more energy, rather than less (<http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2015/10/feature-can-we-build-iron-man-suit-gives-soldiers-robotic-boost>) .

Why? Because the suit doesn't match its movements precisely with the wearer's movements. The simple act of walking (along with other simple acts we take for granted) requires a lot of computation.

Human walking is very efficient, in part because you aren't working all the time. Your legs have a pendulum-like motion. Your muscles aren't pushing the whole time your leg is moving. It swings forward and your muscles act at just the right time to provide pushes that keep the motion going.

The timing of these pushes is crucial. Think about what you do when you push a child on a swing (another pendulum). A series of small pushes can make the child swing higher—but you have to deliver those pushes at just the right time. If the timing of the robotic push isn't precisely coordinated with the effort of your muscles, the suit makes it harder to walk, rather than easier.

Then there's the question of delays in the system. Suppose you push a button in the suit to lift an arm. There's a delay between your button push and the suit response. So you push the button longer and harder—and the suit moves farther than you want. So you pull back—and that takes you too far back. The result is an oscillation, like the rough ride you get when a new driver is learning to operate a standard transmission car.

In that situation, the suit ends up fighting with you—and you're likely to lose that fight. It is, after all a "power suit."

YOU ARE THE WEAKEST LINK

You, the wearer, are the central processing unit of the suit. But viewed from one perspective, you are also the weakest part of the system, if the system is an armored, "Ironman" suit. The suit is tough as nails, but you are squishy and soft.

That leads to some problems. You reach up to cover your mouth when you sneeze and you slap yourself silly with your super-powered arm. You move in a way that makes the suit collide with itself—and you're in for major damage.

And much as we love the idea of the rocket thrusters in Tony Stark's boots, we'll give them a pass. When Tony's suit accelerates from zero to sixty mph in half a second, he'd feel a five-g force. His body would weigh about half a ton. If you want to know what that feels like, ask four friends to climb up on your shoulders. The suit can handle the stress, but can Tony's knees and ankles?

THE SOFTER SIDE OF ROBOTICS

Fortunately, there are options other than the heavy, high-powered Ironman suit. There are labs working on suits that look nothing like Ironman's suit or Ripley's power loader.

Conor Walsh and his colleagues at the Harvard Biodesign Lab started their design of an exoskeleton by analyzing the biomechanics and physiology of human walking. They looked at how carrying heavy loads changes the biomechanics of walking.

In addition to engineers, roboticists, and biomechanists, Walsh's team includes functional apparel designers. Instead of armor, the group opted for fabric. This is soft technology—so flexible that users can wear the suit under their clothes.

The resulting exosuit works in parallel with the wearer's muscles and tendons. It applies small amounts of assistance to the muscles and tendons just when they need it. Batteries and motors are worn at the waist, and cables transmit forces to the joints.

To make all this work, the suit has soft sensors that detect the stretch and movement of a muscle. They're silicone sensors with channels filled with a conductive liquid. When your muscle stretches, so does the silicone sensor. As the silicone stretches, the resistance of the liquid to the transmission of electricity changes—and that communicates the change in the muscle.

This shift in approach seems to be paying off in efficiency. The soft exosuit has been shown to reduce the wearer's energy expenditure.

Roam Robotics, a spinoff of San Francisco-based Otherlabs, is developing air-powered soft exosuits. Tim Swift, the CEO, talks of the need for fundamental changes in the way we make and evaluate exoskeletons. His group is working to reduce weight and cost of exoskeletons without sacrificing capabilities. That's essential to making robots that are affordable

and practical enough for everyday life. Swift compares a traditionally made exoskeleton arm—weighing fifteen pounds and costing \$20,000—with a soft exoskeleton arm that weighs just one pound and costs twenty dollars in materials.

Forget Ironman and those super Heinlein soldiers. We're rooting for a different future: a cuddly exosuit that will help us with a nudge when we need it.

Paul Doherty works at The Exploratorium, San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception—where science and science fiction meet. For more on Paul's work and his latest adventures, visit [*www.exo.net/~pauld*](http://www.exo.net/~pauld). Pat Murphy is a science educator, a science fiction writer, and occasionally a troublemaker. She works at Mystery Science, developing hands-on lessons for elementary school. You can learn more about what she's up to at [*www.brazenhussies.net/Murphy*](http://www.brazenhussies.net/Murphy).

FILMS: THE LANGUAGE OF LOSS, TRUST, AND HEPTAPODS

By *Kathi Maio* | 1566 words



HUMAN communication is a tricky proposition. Even assuming that folks share the same language—out of the over 6,500 languages currently spoken on this planet—the chances for misstatements and misunderstandings are shockingly high. In texts, emails, phone calls, videoconferences, and even face-to-face, people manage to blow their chances to meaningfully connect with their own species more frequently than any of us would like to admit.

But what if you weren't trying to communicate with another human, but rather with a completely alien species from another planet? This is an issue science fiction has considered for a very long time. And yet, when it comes to film, first-contact communication has generally been, to use an American vernacular phrase, a piece of cake.

In one of the most famous alien visitor flicks, 1951's *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, two beings land their saucer in the heart of Washington, D.C. One is an oversized robot; a strong and silent type with mad skills for neutralizing human weaponry. (This is a talent frequently needed, as Americans are portrayed as a shoot-first-ask-questions-later bunch.) But the real intergalactic emissary is a handsome humanoid in a sleek jumpsuit, who announces in the Queen's plummy English, that he and his massive pal "have come to visit you in peace and with goodwill."

Michael Rennie's Klaatu grows impatient with humanity's "childish jealousies" and "stupidity." But he certainly has no language barrier in expressing that fact to his American hosts. He even, more or less, blends in with the humans at Mrs. Crockett's Washington boarding house while he's on

the lam. Although his landlady does peg him as an out-of-towner, since she prides herself on spotting a New England accent from a mile away.

There's no mistaking Keanu Reeves's accent for one from either England or New England. But he does, as Klaatu, speak perfectly passable English when he lands in New York, in his 2008 remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. He just adds a monotonic accent to his already flattened acting voice—and, *voilà* ! He's an alien from the cosmos community who can easily express his disapproval of human environmental rapaciousness in English, and even in Mandarin.

When Steven Spielberg released his groundbreaking *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 1977, he was willing to forgo portraying an alien species as completely relatable humanoids who arrived capable of speaking the local lingo. When his visitors finally appeared in all their glowing glory, at Devils Tower in Wyoming, their communication was a bit imprecise, as communicated in numerical sequences, sonorous musical tones, and a touch of sign language. Goodwill was nevertheless the rule of the day (despite the fact that the aliens had been kidnapping humans for years). After landing at the base of the western butte they make friends easily and take off with a few new human samples—including the film's obsessed hero, played by Richard Dreyfuss—as a parting gift.

Twenty years later, Robert Zemeckis directed the Michael Goldenberg and James V. Hart screenplay based on Carl Sagan's *Contact* (1997). At that point, we were back to a humanoid alien, or, at least, an alien presenting himself through a shimmering holographic projection of a human. In fact, in an especially schmaltzy twist [spoiler alert!] the interplanetary ambassador assumes the form and manner of the scientist heroine's long dead but deeply loved papa (played by David Morse). How's that for making an alien species engaging and accessible? Space/Time Traveler Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster) finds her alien contact so approachable, she immediately falls into his paternalistic arms.

It's interesting that many people have seen parallels between the film *Contact* and the movie I am about to discuss, *Arrival*. It's an understandable correlation, I suppose. Both movies have as their protagonists women scholars with a quiet demeanor, a passion for their prospective fields, and a brave openness to discovery. And both women will let nothing stand in their way to make a meaningful connection with sentient beings from another planet.

In *Arrival* , the aliens are kind enough to come to Earth. But *are* they kind? Twelve gigantic rock-like, and yet oddly graceful, objects fly to twelve spots throughout our planet and hover above land and sea. These near-landings engender widespread concern (even panic) around the globe. Where did they come from and what do they want? The latter being the most pressing question. And since Earth has no one leader, one language, or one approach to any issue, each spaceship is dealt with differently. Scholars and military members from around the world are gathered near the ships. In the U.S., the visitation site is over a verdant pasture in Montana (not so very far, one assumes, from Spielberg's Devils Tower). Contact is being coordinated by a cool and collected Colonel named Weber (Forest Whitaker).

Looking for the best people for his team, Colonel Weber swoops his chopper down at the waterside property of Dr. Louise Banks (Amy Adams). She is a brilliant translator and linguist who is eager to take on the challenge of deciphering a language that sounds like a mix of thumps, clicks, flutters, and the groaning song of humpback whale. Dr. Banks will lead the linguistics team, and leading the science side of the operation is a physicist named Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner, playing the secondary supportive role to which female "leads" are usually relegated).

Albeit unlikely, it *is* possible that some of my gentle readers have yet to see *Arrival* . So, perhaps it is better if I do not go into great detail about the look and demeanor of the alien visitors. But suffice it to say that they do not resemble dapper Michael Rennie in anyway whatsoever. How could they, when they are referred to as Heptapods.

I would hazard a guess that the majority of *F&SF* readers have also read the brilliant and very moving novella upon which *Arrival* is based. That award-winning tale by Ted Chiang, "Story of Your Life," with its shifting memory sequences and frequent discussion of linguistics and science, seemed far too cerebral and complex to be captured in a modern movie; especially a movie released by a major studio at a time when film sf is completely dominated by comic superheroes, wizards, and nouveau space cowboys. Luckily, *Arrival* was not made by a major studio. It was made independently and only acquired by Paramount after being financed by Shawn Levy's 21 Laps Entertainment and several other producing cohorts. The filmmakers behind the movie are also unexpected. The film was directed by a French-Canadian helmer named Denis Villeneuve, who has made wide-ranging films (*Incendies* , *Prisoners* , *Sicario*) more oriented toward

storytelling than blockbuster ambitions. And although screenwriter Eric Heisserer is no stranger to fantasy, he was heretofore pigeonholed as a horror writer with movies like *Lights Out*, *The Thing*, and *Final Destination 5*.

Both the writer and director of *Arrival* committed themselves to the spirit and much of the content of Ted Chiang's story. And so their movie—one of the best and brainiest sf films in recent memory—depicts the linguistic and scientific challenge of human scholars to understand and be understood by creatures from another world. And it interlaces that with the story of a mother's memories of nurturing a cherished daughter to young adulthood only to be devastated by her death.

Yes, the film's plot does get ginned up a bit. For audience members bottle fed on blockbuster tropes, who might find all the discussions of the meanings of inky circular clouds of the Heptapod written language too tedious, an occasional explosion or (off-camera) armed insurrection is inserted just to keep them awake. And there is even a chase scene that puts our heroine in peril. But lovers of true sf will not need the distraction of such frippery. You will be entranced by the process of scholarly revelation and interspecies connection as well as the haunting power of a mother's mourning.

Clearly, a central character who is more about thinking and feeling than high-action doing takes an actor with a subtle but powerful range. Amy Adams has this in spades. Her Louise is smart, dedicated, and fully capable of unraveling the mysteries of alien "tongues" as well as her own future as a woman and mother. Emotions ranging from joy to grief to the wonder of a scholarly breakthrough play across her expressive face in a way that keeps the audience with her every step of the way.

I fear that the filmmakers might have felt the need to put too much of a Christopher Nolan spin on their story toward the end, however. The non-linear nature of time for the visiting species seems to imbue their language with some strange mojo. By decoding their language, our scholarly heroine appears to have achieved something akin to superpowers in the closing moments of the movie. Acquiring such a "weapon," Louise faces several new moral conundrums that the movie is not willing to sufficiently explore.

And I do wonder: Was there really a need to tack on a message of international peace and cooperation to this storyline? Probably not. But encouraging various political and national forces to foster trust and unity can't be a bad thing—especially in times like these! So I am willing to give

the filmmakers a pass on that one. Just as I understand their need to give a plausible (if slightly loopy) reason for the Heptapodian visitation.

Still, it is author Ted Chiang who truly embraced the profound mysteries of his first contact story. In his fiction a woman acknowledges the uncertainty of her future. And as for the Heptapods? Humanity never learns why they came or why they left.

Life is never as tidy as filmmakers want it to be.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

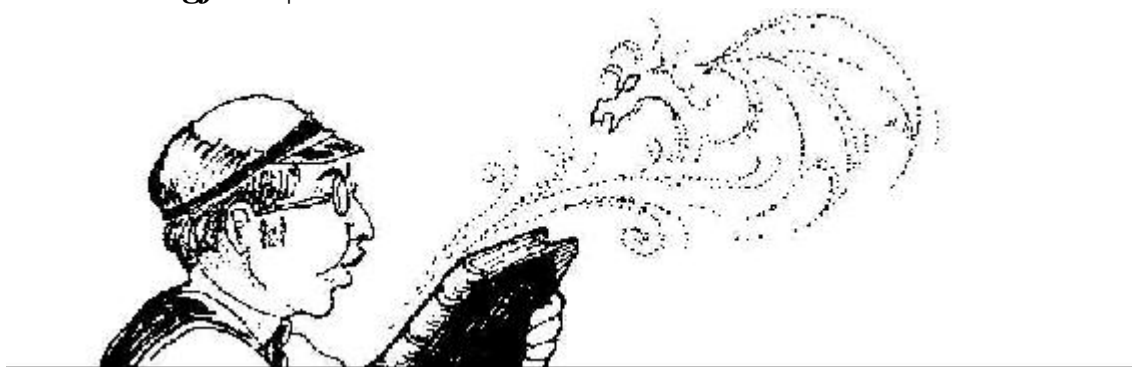
By C.C. Finlay | 117 words

We hope you enjoyed meeting Baldemar in "Ten Half-Pennies" by Matthew Hughes earlier in this issue because the street-smart wizard's henchman returns in next month's cover story, "The Prognosticant," along side new work by Richard Bowes, Leah Cypess, and many others.

We also have an important announcement for our ebook readers. For years, *F&SF* has had an exclusive electronic distribution arrangement with Amazon Kindle. We're still available by Kindle if that's your preferred format, but beginning with the release of our November/December issue a few months ago (which is when we're writing this note), *F&SF* can also be found at Weightless Books. You can now purchase a 6-issue subscription or buy single issues in DRM-free formats anywhere in the world at weightlessbooks.com!

CURIOSITIES

By David Langford | 254 words



A BELEAGUERED CITY,

BY MRS. OLIPHANT (1879)

ADMIRER by M.R. James as an exemplary religious ghost story, this tale of "the Seen and the Unseen" is set in the French city of Semur, where they speak Hercule Poirotese—fluent if quirky English, sprinkled with untranslatable Gallicisms like *le bon Dieu* and *les morts*.

Impiety is rife, alas. Coarse-minded atheists prefer to worship money (that is, *l'argent*). Even non-churchgoers like the mayor are affronted. As people keep saying, "It is enough to make the dead rise out of their graves!"

Sure enough, they do. The July sunshine dims, just as in England "where the sea-fogs so often blot out the sky." That evening there appears a huge written proclamation from the dead: "Go! Leave this place to us...." Nothing else is visible, but in the book's best scene the pressure of a ghostly throng swiftly empties the city. Semur is now besieged not by spirits but by its own townsfolk.

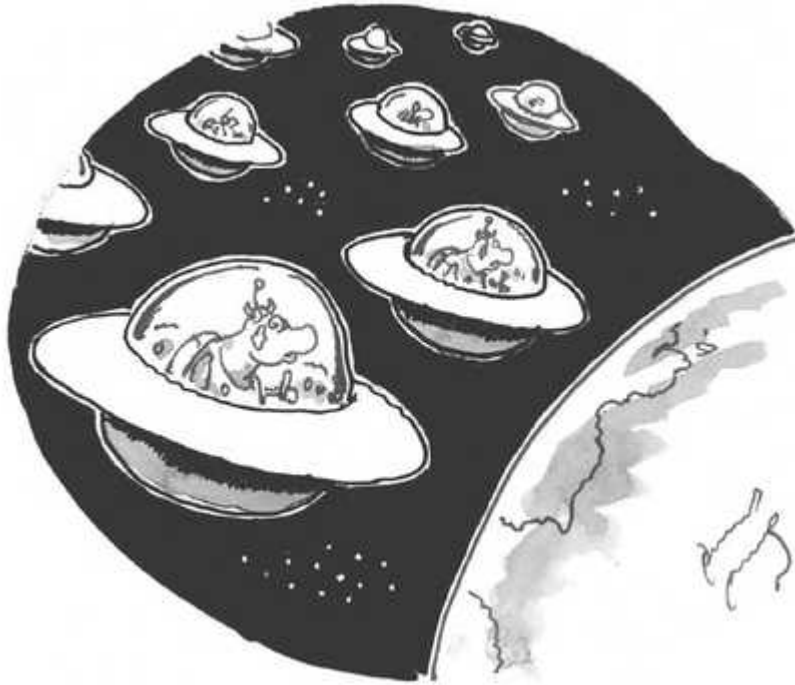
It's tempting to argue that Margaret Oliphant's personal losses, of three infant children and her TB-stricken husband, inclined her toward an ultimate note of consolation in this one long tale of the supernatural. (She also wrote short ghost stories.) All ends upliftingly.

A Beleaguered City is creepy but restrained, never crossing into outright horror. It impressed Kipling, whose *Stalky & Co.* schoolboy persona adapts it for whispering by twilight at his school, "in a fog—besieged by ghosts of dead boys, who hauled chaps out of their beds.... None of 'em have ever let me finish it. It gets just awful at the end." A version we'll never read.

—David Langford

Cartoon (Masear-1)

By Arthur Masear | 14 words



*"If Earth had been more tolerant, the planet Lactose
would not have been invaded."*

—Arthur Masear

Cartoon (Downes)

By Nick Downes | 13 words



"Why are all the guys I meet either married, gay, or undead?"

—*Nick Downes*

Cartoon (Masear-2)

By Arthur Masear | 12 words



"I'll come for you tomorrow between 10:00 AM and 5:00 PM."

—*Arthur Masear*

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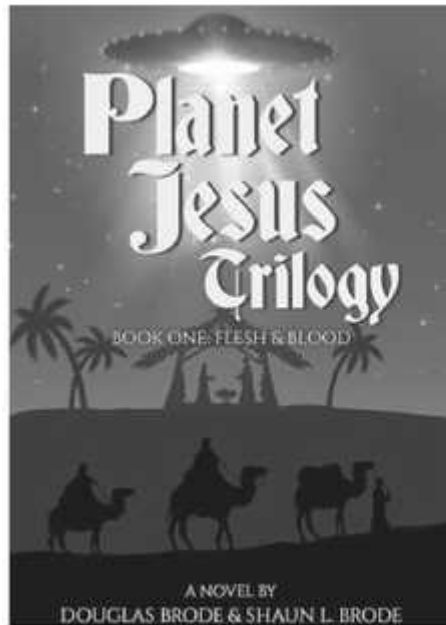
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